

TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST: AMBITIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

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TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST: AMBITIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Turkey is launching initiative after ambitious initiative aimed at stabilising the Middle East. Building on the successes of its normalisation with Syria and Iraq, it is facilitating efforts to reduce conflicts, expanding visa-free travel, ramping up trade, integrating infrastructure, forging strategic relationships and engaging in multilateral regional platforms. For some, this new activism is evidence that Turkey is turning from its traditional allies in Europe and the United States. In fact, its increased role in the Middle East is a complement to and even dependent on its ties to the West.

This report assesses Turkey's growing engagement with the Middle East within the broader frame of Turkish foreign and trade policy. The process is still in its infancy, faces official scepticism in Arab governments and has divided opinion among Turkey's Western allies. Yet, the attempts to grow the regional economy, create interdependence and foster peace have positive potential. At a time when negotiations to join the European Union (EU) have faltered, Ankara has adopted early EU gradualist integration tactics for post-Second World War peace in Europe as a model for strengthening long-term stability and healing the divisions of the Middle East.

Turkey's self-declared "zero-problem" foreign policy to end disputes with its neighbours has worked well in Syria and Iraq, and its facilitation role in some Middle East conflicts has booked some success, for instance in hosting Syria-Israel proximity talks in 2008. Ankara has been less effective, however, in intractable matters like the dispute between Fatah and Hamas. The sharpening tone of Turkey-Israel relations has raised Turkish leaders' popularity among Middle Eastern publics but has undermined trust among traditional allies in Washington, Brussels and even some Arab capitals.

Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) leaders' rhetoric, and their new regional activism extending from Persian Gulf states to Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), have given rise to perceptions that they have changed Turkey's fundamental Westward direction to become part of an Islamist bloc, are attempting to revive the Ottoman Empire or have "turned to the East". These

are incorrect. The basic trends in the country's regional activism seen today were well established before AKP came to power, and NATO membership and the relationship with the U.S. remain pillars of Turkish policy.

While Turkey is bitter over attacks by France, Germany and others on its EU negotiation process between 2005 and 2008, half of its trade is still with the EU, and less than one quarter of its exports go to Middle East states – a proportion typical for the past twenty years. The global nature of Turkey's realignment is underlined by the fact that Russia and Greece have been among the biggest beneficiaries of its regional trade boom.

Nevertheless, since the end of the Cold War, Turkey has been shifting its foreign policy priority from hard security concerns to soft power and commercial interests and moving away from being a kind of NATO-backed regional gendarme to a more independent player determined to use a plethora of regional integration tools in order to be taken seriously on its own account. Turkey's U.S. and EU partners should support these efforts towards stabilisation through integration.

Ankara has many balls in the air and sometimes promises more than it can deliver, over-sells what it has achieved and seeks a role far away when critical problems remain unsolved at home. Turkey's new prominence is partly attributable to confusion in the region after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a situation that is not necessarily permanent. Some Middle Eastern governments are also wary of the impact on their own publics of emotional Turkish rhetoric against Israel or about implicit claims to represent the whole Muslim world.

Turkey should sustain the positive dynamics of its balanced relationships with all actors in the neighbourhood and its efforts to apply innovatively the tactics of early EU-style integration with Middle East neighbours. While doing so, however, it should pay attention to messaging, both internationally, to ensure that gains with Middle Eastern public opinion are not undercut by loss of trust among traditional allies, and domestically, to ensure that all Turkish constituencies are included, informed and committed to new regional projects over the long term.

Also, it will gain credibility and sustainability for its ambitions if it can solve disputes close to home first, like Cyprus and Armenia.

Middle Eastern elites worry about any sign of Ankara turning its back on its EU accession process. Much of their recent fascination with Turkey's achievements derives from the higher standards, greater prosperity, broader democracy, legitimacy of civilian rulers, advances towards real secularism and successful reforms that have resulted from negotiating for membership of the EU. At

the same time, Turkey and its leaders enjoy unprecedented popularity and prestige in Middle Eastern public opinion, notably thanks to their readiness to stand up to Israel. Turkey's new strength, its experience in building a strong modern economy and its ambition to trade and integrate with its neighbours offer a better chance than most to bring more stability and reduce the conflicts that have plagued the Middle East for so long.

Istanbul/Brussels, 7 April 2010

TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST: AMBITIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

I. INTRODUCTION

For many decades after its establishment in 1923, modern Turkey ignored and at times scorned the Middle East. Republican founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the new rulers blamed conservative Islamic ideas for holding back progress in the region and turned their faces towards the modernity represented by Europe.¹ There was bitterness among many Turks, who saw Arab collaboration with the British during the latter's seizure of the region as having knifed the Ottoman Empire in the back.² And, when the Arab world won independence after the Second World War, several states blamed many of their ills on Ottoman Turkish misrule.

Alongside these basic dynamics during the early republican era, Turkey's relationships with the Arab world and Israel were subjected to great and sometimes emotional swings between enthusiasm and deep distrust. Another characteristic was a lack of planning or thinking about the region, a problem that endured until the late 1990s.³

The end of the Cold War in 1991 was a turning point in both Turkey's self-image and its regional role. Turgut Özal, prime minister from 1983, and president from 1989 until his death in 1993, inherited a country highly dependent on Western alliances and with poor to bad relations with its region.⁴ Breaking many taboos, he

started improving relations with eight often difficult neighbours.⁵

Another key figure in articulating a new, all-round Turkish foreign policy was the late İsmail Cem, foreign minister between 1997 and 2002. He was the co-architect with his Greek counterpart of one of the major regional breakthroughs of the past decade, normalisation between Turkey and Greece. He initiated meetings between the European Union (EU) and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), a harmonious new approach to neighbours, engagement with Israel and the Palestinians and cooperation for more economic interdependence.⁶ The move from near armed conflict with Syria in 1998 to remarkable demonstrations of integration was largely the result of actions taken by Cem and the highly secularist administration that preceded the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP).

A. RIGIDITY AND OPPORTUNISM

After the Second World War, Soviet threats to seize control of north-western and north-eastern Turkey forced Ankara into close alliance with the U.S. and membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Turkey created a Cold War role for itself as a U.S.-backed regional gendarme, opposing itself to countries in the Middle East that were often aligned with the Soviet Union. The rigidity and regional loneliness of the role fitted in with Turkey's early republican development

¹ See Crisis Group Europe Report N°184, *Turkey and Europe: The Way Ahead*, 17 August 2007.

² As Turkish author Yaşar Kemal put it, "the Arabian deserts are already full of our bones". See Nicole Pope and Hugh Pope, *Turkey Unveiled: a History of Modern Turkey* (London 1997), p. 219.

³ "There was no Middle East policy. Whenever I wrote articles about the region, people thought I was promoting an alternative to the West. I was just saying that we should at least have a vision". Crisis Group interview, Meliha Altunışık, dean, International Relations Department, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 12 February 2010.

⁴ "During the Cold War, Turkey foreign policy was completely linked to the West. Turkey implemented whatever was decided in Washington, Brussels and London. Now the world has changed". Sami Kohen, *Milliyet* senior foreign affairs commentator, Istanbul Policy Centre speech, 7 December 2009.

⁵ Turkey's direct neighbours are Greece, Bulgaria, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq and Syria, and it shares sea borders with Russia and Cyprus. For the purposes of this report, the "Middle East" means Arab League members and Iran.

⁶ "AKP makes it look like they're first to say everything, but even the idea that Turkey should be a 'central' country was first said by [the late Turkish leader] Ecevit". Crisis Group interview, Meliha Altunışık, dean, International Relations Department, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 12 February 2010. "When I travelled with [the late Foreign Minister] Cem, we first suggested lots of these initiatives but didn't really have an impact, because our image was different. Turkey has changed now. We have a strong government, Davutoğlu has a clear vision, and he is pushing the neighbourhood policy to the maximum". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

model, in which its rulers tried to construct a self-sufficient country with a state and one-party rule that took all major political and economic decisions.

Turkey's image as an agent of American policy in the Middle East appeared confirmed to the new nationalist governments of the Arab world when, in 1955, it rashly pushed for the creation of the Baghdad Pact, a short-lived, U.S.-backed attempt to bring every nation in the region into an alliance against the Soviet Union.⁷ By 1958, Turkey had signed a secret accord with Israel and Iran, joining forces against the Arabs. Then Turkey took France's side in opposing Algerian independence. The Arab attitude was summarised by Egypt's President Nasser, when he publicly declared Turkey *persona non grata* in the Arab world – a sentiment many Turks reciprocated with folk sayings like “never get mixed up in the affairs of Arabs”.⁸

Turkey began to open up again to the Arab world after 1964, when the U.S. denied Ankara support in the worsening Cyprus dispute.⁹ Then, after the first oil boom of the 1970s, Turkey saw an opportunity in the petrodollar wealth of its neighbours. New Arab markets laid the foundations for Turkey's first boom in external trade beyond its former mainstays of hazelnuts and dried figs. Many of Turkey's construction companies got their start in this period and went on to become major regional players. This was accompanied by an upsurge of sympathy with the Palestinians – then based not so much on a shared perception of Muslim identity as on a shared leftist ideology. However, even then, the overriding motivation was a sense of economic interest.¹⁰

However much Turkey's new activism has improved its relations with the Middle East and other neighbours, its history anchors it in European and Western institutions. It is a member of NATO since the 1950s, indeed of almost every European organisation except the EU, which it is negotiating to join. In the UN, it has always been part of the Western European and Others Group. Since becoming a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 2008, it has not conspicuously represented

or acted as a spokesman for any specifically Arab or Islamic agenda.¹¹

B. FUNDAMENTALS IN TURKEY-ISRAEL TIES

Turkey became one of the first countries to recognise the State of Israel in 1949, and diplomats were exchanged in 1952. These actions were due to its wish to consolidate its place in the Western alliance, to its historically good relationship with Jewish communities in the Middle East¹² and a bad relationship with the new Arab nation states.¹³

For Israel, a good relationship with Turkey fitted into a policy of making alliances, covert and overt, with countries on its periphery, whether Arab or non-Arab. Turkey was the most important and public component of this strategy,¹⁴ and Ankara remains one of Israel's most important diplomatic missions.

The relationship went through a golden era in the 1990s, as Turkey sought to encourage the Oslo Process that appeared to be bringing a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians; to gain leverage in its problematic relationship with Syria; to have access to sophisticated Israeli weaponry; and to win pro-Israel U.S. lobbying groups as allies against the Armenian diaspora, which was seeking U.S. official recognition of Ottoman-era massacres of Armenians in 1915 as genocide. Israeli tourists flocked to Turkish resorts. Oil prices also reached rock bottom, wiping out the spending power of the rest of the Middle East.

⁷ Turkey “pursued a Middle East policy that was ill-informed and lacked judgement”. Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War* (London, 2003) pp. 241-249.

⁸ Pope and Pope, *Turkey Unveiled*, op. cit., pp. 223-227.

⁹ Turkish leaders and public opinion were shocked when President Lyndon Johnson sent a letter warning Ankara that the U.S. would not protect Turkey if its actions over Cyprus provoked a Soviet intervention. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, March 2010.

¹⁰ Robins, *Suits and Uniforms*, op. cit., pp. 241-249.

¹¹ As a Security Council member, Turkey has shown itself balanced in its general positions, professional in handling the committee on North Korean sanctions and not notably different in actions on Iran from non-Middle Eastern countries like Brazil or China. A threat in 2009 by Prime Minister Erdoğan that Turkey would raise in the Security Council Chinese actions against Turkic Uyghurs at the time of disturbances in Xinjiang did not materialise. Crisis Group interviews, UN diplomats, New York, February-March 2010.

¹² Turkey also takes pride in the welcome it has offered Jews fleeing European persecution, notably from Spain in 1492 and Jewish academics from Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.

¹³ “The Soviet presence in the region, and its alliances, made Turkey feel very insecure. The presence of [Israel] was seen positively, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Similarly, after the Cold War, Syria was a threat, Iran was a threat, internationally and domestically. Our number one and number. two threats were directly connected to Iran and Syria”. Crisis Group interview, Gen. (ret.) Haldun Solmaztürk, 10 February 2010.

¹⁴ “For Jerusalem, the intimacy between the two governments was second only to U.S.-Israel relations”. Efraim Inbar, director, Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies, “Israeli-Turkish Tensions and Beyond”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, fall 2009.

Turkey upgraded its diplomatic envoy to ambassadorial level in 1992. It signed a military partnership with Israel in 1996, including permission for Israel to use Turkey's wide highlands for aerial exercises. Intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation grew. Turkey was also interested in military technology – modernisation of its American M-60 tanks and F-4 warplanes and the purchase of unmanned drones – which, unlike the U.S. and the EU, Israel was willing to supply quickly and without uncomfortable conditions.

Nevertheless, the relationship has fluctuated greatly. There has always been Turkish popular sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians. The relationship hit lows under non-AKP governments after the 1967 Israeli-Arab war and in 1980, when Israel declared Jerusalem its capital. Tensions also rose during the first and second Palestinian intifadas. Indeed, during Israeli occupations of West Bank towns in April 2002, the firmly secular late Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit characterised Israeli actions as “genocide”.¹⁵ The relationship has come under more strain as Turkish politics has become more subject to public opinion¹⁶ and at all times of worsening Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

C. THE NEAR ABROAD: SYRIA AND IRAQ

During the late twentieth century, Turkey's most problematic Middle Eastern relationships were with Syria and Iraq. It is emblematic of its new success that relations with Damascus and Baghdad are now among the best.¹⁷ The strategic aim of a deliberate focus on these two countries is to make 45 million consumers more accessible to Turkish trade and to reverse more than a decade in which they had been the source of subversion and armed attacks.

Syria had particularly strong anti-Turkish feelings because Turkey, thanks to a colonial-era gift by France, had taken over the valuable province of Alexandretta and turned it into the Turkish province of Hatay. The two countries were also at opposite poles of the Cold War, with Turkey solidly in the NATO camp and Syria mostly aligned with the Soviet Union. Especially after

the 1980s, Turkey began building extensive dams on the Tigris-Euphrates river system, reducing water flows into parched northern Syria.

Syria used its political prestige as a leading Arab state to turn the Arab League and the broader Arab world against Turkey. Its state-run media frequently attacked Turkey. Partly due to a suspicion that Syrian domestic opponents found safe haven in Turkey, Syria allowed Turkish Kurd militants of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to set up military training camps in Lebanon and let PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan base himself in Damascus.

Turkey's frustration, along with Syrian weakness as Russian support waned, brought matters to a head in 1998. Amid Turkish military posturing on the heavily armed border, a top Turkish general issued what amounted to an ultimatum. Soon Damascus asked PKK leader Öcalan to leave, paving the way to his capture in Kenya. Almost immediately, Turkey switched to a policy of embracing its former Syrian antagonists, setting the stage for the extraordinary blooming of trade and political relations over the next decade.

Political differences between Ankara and Baghdad were always far less than between Ankara and Damascus, but Iraq's instability after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait made it a more immediate security problem. International sanctions meant Turkey lost its second-biggest trading partner overnight, and in April 1991, 500,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees fled to and over the Turkish border. Sudden unemployment along the trade route encouraged recruits to Turkey's ethnic Kurdish militant insurgency. The situation was made even worse for Ankara by the way the U.S.-led reversal of the Kuwait invasion was followed by years of a security vacuum just over the border in northern Iraq, accompanied by what might be the beginnings of an independent Kurdish state. A new generation of challenges appeared after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, with a real possibility of Iraq breaking up and a redrawing of Middle Eastern borders and strategic balances.

Fears that the U.S. invasion would further destabilise the region and consolidate a Kurdish emancipation process, buttressed by massive Turkish popular opposition to any war, lay behind the parliament's unexpected refusal to allow the passage of U.S. troops through Turkey to Iraq on 1 March 2003.¹⁸ This decision led to four years

¹⁵“People think Turkey has turned its back on Israel [in 2009] because AKP is an ‘Islamist party’ with a hidden agenda. That is not true [since criticism of Israel has been done by all kinds of previous governments]”. İbrahim Kalın, chief foreign policy adviser to the Turkish prime minister, interview with *al-Majalla*, 26 November 2009.

¹⁶“Israelis and Americans have felt in the past that if you're good with the Turkish military, then things work. This is not the case any more”. Sami Kohen, speech, op. cit.

¹⁷“We want close relations with these two countries especially”. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, January 2010.

¹⁸This decision included a paradox: Turkish nationalist deputies opposed allowing U.S. troops to transit because the U.S. action might lead to an independent Kurdish state, while Turkish Kurd deputies opposed it because they believed Turkish troops might follow the Americans into northern Iraq and crush the fragile Kurdistan regional government.

of stress with Washington and the new U.S.-dominated regime in Iraq. However, in October 2007, Turkey and the U.S. came to an entente that included a Washington-brokered understanding between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, in which the Iraqi Kurds pledged solidarity with Ankara in its fight against PKK insurgents.¹⁹

The long-standing strategy of allowing its businessmen to bind the Iraqi Kurdish economy tightly into Turkey acquired a real political dimension, as dialogue with Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government began. In March 2010, this reached a high point with the arrival of a Turkish consul-general in Arbil, the seat of the Iraqi Kurdish administration. From Turkey's perspective, a fundamental shift occurred when Syria and Iraq stopped giving covert support to Kurdish militants.²⁰ And if Turkish warplanes bomb PKK militant camps deep in Iraq, it often happens that Iranian artillery is shelling related PJAK²¹ camps in the same area on the same day.

II. NEW ACTIVISM

Since sweeping to power in 2002, the AKP has changed both the style and the substance of Turkey's policy toward the Middle East. But debate continues on how much is really new, whether the policy treats the Middle East differently from neighbouring countries elsewhere, whether there is a specifically Muslim or even Islamist dynamic and whether this policy replaces or supplements Turkey's long-running post-Second World War alliances with NATO and the EU.

Principal AKP actors have included Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Abdullah Gül and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. These centre-right, religious-minded leaders were at least sympathetic to Islamism in their youth, when Erdoğan and Gül were prominent in the religious-oriented former Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP). All are noticeably warmer and more outgoing to Muslim and "Eastern" partners than Turkey's traditional Western allies.²² While Prime Minister Erdoğan stayed away from Brussels for four years until January 2009,²³ he and other AKP leaders have visited Middle East states with dizzying frequency. On top of his long-standing tendency to fiery denunciations of Israel, Erdoğan in particular has espoused a rhetorical enthusiasm for Middle East actors seen as hardline in the West.

Many AKP leaders grew more cautious about Middle East engagements after domestic and international rebuffs during their short period in power with the Welfare Party in 1996/1997.²⁴ While he used to see Turkey as an integral part of the Middle East,²⁵ President Gül now prioritises an EU perspective and describes Turkey's philosophy as feeling "responsible to take care of the

²² Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, February-March 2010. "When [former Turkish leaders Tansu] Çiller and [Turgut] Özal visited [Western capitals] they'd take a few hours to wander round. Erdoğan feels out of place. He feels more comfortable in Tehran and Damascus". Sami Kohen, speech, op. cit. Nevertheless, Erdoğan sent his children to be educated in the U.S. and Italy and did take time on a recent visit to Rome to go with his family to a *gelateria*.

²³ Prior to 2005, however, Erdoğan had been a relatively frequent visitor to Brussels.

²⁴ Most notable internationally was an incident in which Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi insulted Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan over the Kurdish question during a meeting aired live on television in his tent in Libya. Domestically, Middle Eastern involvements helped build sentiment against the Welfare Party and played a role in the Turkish Armed Forces' indirect ousting of its government in February 1997.

²⁵ As a parliamentarian in the mid-1990s, Gül expressed Turkey's regional ambition as: "We don't want to be the last of the foxes. We want to be the head of the sheep". *Yeni Yüzyıl*, 9 June 1996.

¹⁹ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°81, *Turkey and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict or Cooperation?*, 13 November 2008.

²⁰ Ironically, Turkey's Kurdish reforms mean that Syria now fears suppressed Kurds may look to Turkey to demand more rights.

²¹ The PJAK (the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan) is closely related to the PKK but principally active in Iran.

region around us. Some problems are directly related to us. With some we don't have a direct link. We want to contribute to a resolution of them all".²⁶

The key Turkish foreign policy actor of the past decade is Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. An academic who has written about history and geography as the key sources of Turkey's strength,²⁷ he became the chief foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2003 and was appointed foreign minister in May 2009. He now epitomises the new activism.²⁸ He lists his goals as the "consolidation of democracy" and the "settlement of disputes, which directly or indirectly concern Turkey".²⁹ Once described as "part Machiavelli, part Rumi",³⁰ he himself says he balances realism and idealism.³¹ He also positions himself politically somewhere between the soft-spoken President Gül and the more combative Prime Minister Erdoğan.³²

Davutoğlu describes his policy as "a proactive diplomacy with the aim of strengthening prosperity, stability and security ... cultural harmony and mutual respect ... utmost integration and full cooperation" in Turkey's neighbourhood, a geopolitical crossroads in which he includes the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Middle East from the Gulf to North Africa".³³ Moving away from the defensive approach of some of his predecessors, which focused cautiously on the consolidation of an inward-looking Turkish nation state, he asserts:

Turkey enjoys multiple regional identities ... the unique combination of our history and geography brings with it a sense of responsibility ... a call of duty arising from the depths of a multi-dimensional history for Turkey.³⁴

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 3 March 2010.

²⁷ For a good précis of Davutoğlu's book *Stratejik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* [*Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position*] (Istanbul, 2001), see Joshua Walker, "Understanding Turkey's Foreign Policy Through Strategic Depth", Transatlantic Academy paper, November 2009.

²⁸ "Davutoğlu is the driver, the intellectual force, saying that we can't just hunker down if we want to be the country we say we want to be". Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Ankara, January 2010.

²⁹ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the EU in 2010", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Fall 2009.

³⁰ Meaning that he combines the pragmatic ruthlessness of the mediaeval adviser to Italian princes and the mystical divine inspiration of the Persian/Turkish poet.

³¹ Yigal Schleifer, "Ahmet Davutoğlu: A Thinker in the Halls of Power", *World Policy Review*, 2 February 2010.

³² Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

³³ Davutoğlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the EU in 2010", op. cit.

³⁴ Ibid.

Beyond history, geography, and expanding exports, Turkey has good security reasons to minimise differences with Iran, Syria and Iraq,³⁵ which have at various times been the source of real attempts at destabilisation, terrorist attacks and political subversion.³⁶ With one foot in Europe and the other in the Middle East, Turkey is alarmed that it will be torn in two by Western talk of "clash of civilisations", or a main victim if global fears that Tehran is developing a nuclear weapon lead to a new round of UN sanctions or military action.³⁷ Solving problems with neighbours, or being seen trying to do so, gives Turkey greater geopolitical stature.³⁸ Finally, AKP leaders perceive it as a way of building domestic support.³⁹

Sami Kohen, a commentator closely following Turkish foreign policy since the early 1950s, says the Middle East activism has a selfish as well as an idealistic side:

Any government that engages like this has a selfish purpose, a sense of mission, that this area is in turmoil, and that since we are in this area we are much more qualified [to intervene]. It has in mind the role of an important regional power. In fact whether Turkey is successful or not, if it gains prestige, that gives a lot of good feelings to people in Ankara; they find it very profitable for increasing their influence.⁴⁰

³⁵ "If some say the economy is the main goal of our expansion, I could easily counter that security is equally important". Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat serving in the Middle East, February 2010.

³⁶ "Our approach is very simple. We want stability. We suffered most. We were importing lots of security problems from the Middle East, arms, terrorist training. We have decided that we cannot remain indifferent". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, February 2010.

³⁷ "They see themselves as potentially on the front line of a new Cold War, just like they were on the front line against the Soviets". Crisis Group interview, EU official, Ankara, February 2010.

³⁸ "Once Turkey solves problems with its neighbours, it has nothing to worry about. Then Israel will certainly need Turkey more than Turkey needs Israel". Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, February 2010. "All these involvements help Turkey to gain ground. Turkey turns into an acceptable and influential player. Turkey was always outside the discussions. Arabs never like a foreign actor involved in Arab affairs. [Early on] I felt it personally. It was like I was a total alien". Crisis Group interview, Bülent Aras, Middle East expert, Ankara, 11 February 2010.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Speech, op. cit.

A. REBUFFS FROM EUROPE, STRAINS WITH THE U.S.

After it came to power in 2002, the AKP's focus was on Turkey's traditional Western allies.⁴¹ AKP leader Erdoğan was received by the U.S. president even before he became prime minister. The AKP put its emphasis on pursuing negotiations for full EU membership, proving this in 2003/2004 by ending decades of hardline policy on Cyprus and supporting the ill-fated Annan Plan.

Two setbacks undermined this pro-Western commitment. The first was in March 2003, when Turkish deputies decided not to allow U.S. troops to transit Turkey on their way to invade Iraq, a surprise parliamentary upset that turned AKP leaders' faces visibly pale. For the next four years, bilateral relations suffered great strain, compounded by Turkish popular disapproval of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.⁴² At its lowest point, the number of Turks approving of the U.S. sank to 9 per cent, the lowest rating in the world.⁴³

The second upset came in April 2004, when Greek Cypriot voters overwhelmingly rejected the UN's Annan plan for a Cyprus settlement, even though it was backed by the Turks and Turkish Cypriots, as well as the EU and U.S. Turkish and especially EU leaders failed to manage the great difficulties that resulted, and six years later, Turkey's EU negotiations remain hostage to the Cyprus dispute. This has been compounded by opposition to Turkey's EU accession by populist politicians in France, Germany and other EU states⁴⁴ and a shift in Western perceptions of Turkey after its leader's outbursts against Israel's Gaza war in 2008/2009.

Both these developments put pressure on AKP leaders to give voice to new ideas.⁴⁵ Building on political open-

ings in the Middle East was an obvious choice, much as it was after a U.S. rebuff over Cyprus in 1964 (see above). Turkey's goal has long been to stabilise its backyard and advance trade. But the new, highly active approach triggered a debate over whether Turkey has changed the style or substance of its policy.

In the past it was the opposite, we wanted nothing to do with the region [the Middle East]. The foreign ministry saw it as a swamp that we shouldn't get into. AKP wants to use soft power, interdependence and cooperation, that is, getting rid of the "realist" school of the 1990s, which emphasised the role of military and hard power. AKP wants regional solutions to problems, which is the old Ottoman style. And AKP wants to speak with everyone, whereas previous governments did not.⁴⁶

To some extent, Turkey's rhetoric may have a mainspring in the bitterness it feels at EU statements and policies.⁴⁷ Foreign Minister Davutoğlu hinted as much, saying Turkey's Middle East activism is linked to its wish to be taken more seriously in the West, or, as he often puts it in reference to the Central Asian origins of the Turks, "like the drawing back of the bow to make the arrow fly farther".⁴⁸ Similarly, in a closed meeting, he reportedly said that he was deliberately putting Turkish embassies in prestigious sites in North African capitals, so that "wherever [French President] Sarkozy goes he'll see a Turkish flag".⁴⁹

Watching the economic and strategic stumbling of Europe has made Turkish intellectuals pose new questions.⁵⁰ Career officials of the Turkish foreign ministry, the most pro-EU institution in the country, say they have lost their awe of and respect for Europe.⁵¹ Senior AKP appointees

⁴¹ Ironically, Turkey's nationalist and secularist camps have consistently accused AKP of somehow being slaves of the West who are implementing its plans. Best-selling books have also portrayed Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Gül as Israeli stooges.

⁴² "U.S.-Turkish relations have seriously deteriorated". F. Stephen Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership: U.S.-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change* (Santa Monica, 2010).

⁴³ Pew Global Attitudes Project, 27 June 2007.

⁴⁴ "Turkey and its leaders are disenchanted with the EU. The EU's treatment of Turkey borders on humiliating". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Washington DC, November 2009.

⁴⁵ "Most Turks now feel the plan to join the EU is not realistic. It makes people think about a new world order, a revenge-seeking mindset, 'we'll show them'. It's very dangerous, a drift towards an alliance of authoritarian states, and authoritarianism means that militarism could make a comeback". İler Turan, speech to Transatlantic Academy, Washington DC, 17 November 2009.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Meliha Altunışık, dean, International Relations Department, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 12 February 2010.

⁴⁷ Punning on the Turkish and Arabic word for Syria and its surrounding region, *Sham*, Erdoğan said: "They may have the Schengen visas in the EU, so we decided to create a Shamgen visa". Interview with Al Arabiya television, 14 October 2009.

⁴⁸ A senior Turkish official put it in plainer language: "We'll be taken more seriously in the West if we're stronger in the East". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, November 2009.

⁴⁹ Erhan Seven, "Sarkozy gittiği her yerde bizi görecek [Sarkozy will see us everywhere he goes]", *Yeni Şafak*, 24 November 2009.

⁵⁰ "Apart from the negative signals concerning Turkey's EU membership, the growing feeling is that there is something seriously amiss in Europe, both politically and economically, that Turks should look at more closely in trying to chart their future". Semih İdiz, "Suddenly, the EU seems less attractive for Turks", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 18 February 2010.

⁵¹ I used to be in awe of Europe when I went to European cities. I felt very different today, I'm just not so impressed. Now when I come back to Turkey I think we're doing just fine".

judge that “there is no longer a convincing Western axis”.⁵² Turks now have money to spend, are angered by humiliating requirements to obtain visas to EU states and are ready to try new horizons. Attention lavished on Turkey by Middle Eastern newspapers and visitors has naturally affected the public too.⁵³ İbrahim Kalın, the prime minister’s chief foreign policy adviser, said the policy had some new style, some new substance:

[It] includes proactive diplomacy, zero-problem diplomacy, not confrontation but engagement, and soft power. Turkey exercises power according to invariables – its position at a crossroads of energy and security, its geopolitical position and its history, including the heritage of the Ottoman Empire – and variables, including a young population, democracy, strong non-governmental organisations and a strong economy that is the sixth biggest in Europe and the seventeenth biggest in the world.⁵⁴

B. THE ISLAM FACTOR

Turkey says its main strategic relationships remain with Western alliances like NATO and the EU, and that its “zero-problem” with neighbours foreign policy is based on equal distance with all players in the region. But some AKP leaders’ rhetoric at least implies they may be laying the ground for the creation of a Muslim bloc.⁵⁵ AKP leaders have at times talked of Prime Minister Erdoğan as being the representative of the “1.5 billion Muslims of the world”.⁵⁶

Such thinking is reinforced by the fact that in all major areas, the Caucasus, Balkans, the Middle East and Cyprus, Turkey is the champion of the Azeris, Bosniaks, Pales-

tinians and Turkish Cypriots; that is, supporting a Muslim side against non-Muslims.⁵⁷ The popularity of AKP’s leaders in the Middle East is as much because of their anti-Israel positions as the signs of Turkish progress.⁵⁸

Prime Minister Erdoğan’s rhetoric in particular raises eyebrows.⁵⁹ On a visit to Saudi Arabia, he said in a speech that cooperation with Riyadh was for him just as important as EU membership.⁶⁰ He praised Turkey’s rediscovery of Syria by saying “my brothers ... the river has found its riverbed”.⁶¹ Erdoğan also often compares AKP to the Palestinian militant group Hamas, saying that this is because both won an election and then faced obstacles to taking power.⁶² Most noticeable in this regard was his comment appearing to defend Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir when he was indicted by the International Criminal Court for atrocities in Darfur: “Let me say this very openly and clearly. It is absolutely impossible for someone who is part of our civilisation, someone who has given himself over to our religion of Islam, to commit genocide”.⁶³

The Turkish academic elected in 2004 to head the OIC, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, has gone as far as to propose the formation of an “Islamic Court of Justice” and an “OIC Peace and Security Council”, as well as a joint peace-keeping force drawn from Islamic countries.⁶⁴ Turkey has

Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, December 2009.

⁵² “Turkey is no longer a stagnant country living in the shadow of superpowers in a Cold War world. History no longer flows from west to east ... If we know what we are doing at a time when Europe and America are feeling muddled, whose fault is that?” İbrahim Kalın, chief foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Erdoğan, interview with *al-Majalla*, 26 November 2009.

⁵³ “We Turks are emotional, we react quickly. We’ve always had sympathy for the Palestinians, but when the Arab world began to say such nice things about us, we began to feel much more interested”. Crisis Group interview, Turkish university professor, March 2010.

⁵⁴ Speech, Middle East Institute, 9 October 2009.

⁵⁵ “There is an illogical element in these relations with the leaders of Sudan, Iran, Hamas. You wonder if these guys are not pursuing an Islamic bonding policy. The rhetoric is there. It may turn into reality”. Prof. Soli Özel, Turkish commentator, speech to the Propeller Club, Istanbul, 20 January 2010.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Egemen Bağış, Turkey’s state minister and chief EU negotiator, 19 February 2009.

⁵⁷ “There is a sense that there is exaggerated support for Islamist parties in conflicts, and an exaggerated bias against the non-Muslim side”. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, January 2010.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, January 2010.

⁵⁹ “He is turning into a hero, he’s the only one raising his voice [eg, against Israel]. It’s his style. His advisers are trying to change his style, but it’s his preference”. Crisis Group interview, Bülent Aras, Middle East expert, Ankara, 12 February 2010.

⁶⁰ “Erdoğan: AB ne ise, Saudi Arabistan da o [Erdoğan: whatever the EU is [to us], that is what Saudi Arabia is too]”, *Radikal*, 19 January 2010. A Saudi official in the region said Erdoğan was “wrong” in this analysis. Crisis Group interview, February 2010.

⁶¹ Speech to businessmen in Syria, 23 December 2009.

⁶² Indeed, the mainstream religious-oriented political parties in Turkey, particularly AKP, have never had anything to do with armed struggle. Nevertheless, as one Turkish commentator noted, “when [Erdoğan] talks of Hamas and says ‘when we won the election they said a town hall politician can’t run Turkey, but it didn’t turn out that way’, he’s creating a subconscious equivalence between himself, his party and Hamas”. Sedat Ergin, *Milliyet*, 27 January 2009.

⁶³ Speech to AKP Istanbul officials, *Radikal*, 9 November 2009. Erdoğan also said he was one of the few world leaders who had actually been to Darfur and brought aid, and that even if he did not believe he saw evidence of a genocide, he “was able to say to Bashir what needed to be said”.

⁶⁴ See www.oic-oci.org/topic_detail.asp?t_id=3246.

taken no official position on these suggestions, but such ideas have fed domestic arguments between pro-Islamic and pro-secularist commentators about what AKP is really aiming for, since the AKP government supported his appointment.⁶⁵ At least one Turkish academic believes the party's embrace of the Middle East as "our civilisation" may be an attempt to change Turkey's self-image as a secular nation.⁶⁶

Secularist critics in Turkey are particularly suspicious of AKP's ultimate intentions and warn that it aims for regional leadership under an Islamic banner. According to General (ret.) Haldun Solmaztürk:

They live in a different world. In Erdoğan's mind, the world is black and white, between "our civilisation", meaning Islam, and the rest. The foreign minister talked in Pakistan about using our *imam hatip* [religious high] schools as a model, suggesting that a mild Islam is the idea, and that we may be next. [AKP leaders] love to talk about Gaza and Hamas. I feel the same as they do about the wrongs done [in Palestine]. But what about what went on in Iran, in Sudan, now in Nigeria? What is the reason for this double standard?⁶⁷

Some argue that Prime Minister Erdoğan's rhetorical excesses are part of a strategy to gain the confidence of some Middle East hardliners that is essential because more moderate Arab governments like those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan are hesitant to make space for Turkey.⁶⁸ Others believe it is simply Erdoğan's personal sense of being an outsider that makes him back any third-world representative against the West.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ "If most conflicts are happening in the Middle East or Islamic World, then we have to encourage the mechanisms to prevent these clashes". Commentator İbrahim Karagül, *Yeni Şafak*, 29 January 2010. "There seems to be no such 'common interest' between the Islamic countries. While the Western world is debating a 'clash of civilisations' [which Turkey criticises], I do not know what to say about the dream of establishing a common military force for religious reasons". Commentator Mehmet Yılmaz, *Hürriyet*, 29 January 2010.

⁶⁶ The academic pointed out that one of the pioneers of the new all-round Turkish foreign policy, İsmail Cem, always talked of Turkey's "many civilisations". Crisis Group interview, Meliha Altunışık, dean, International Relations Department, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 12 February 2010.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Gen. (ret.) Haldun Solmaztürk, Ankara, 10 January 2010.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

⁶⁹ Erdoğan was brought up in the rough Istanbul neighbourhood of Kasımpaşa, whose men are a byword in Turkey for macho toughness. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

Turkish officials, however, insist that Turkey's official language is one of optional cooperation, not Islamic unity or coercion,⁷⁰ and underline that the prime minister gives voice to an essential Middle Eastern demand for more respect.⁷¹ Erdoğan himself talks of Turkey being a shareholder in the building of a new Middle East in order to spread peace and trade, based on "a common region, a common geography".⁷² He says he takes positions not because of Muslim identity, but because a battered region⁷³ needs "normalisation".⁷⁴ One official, noting booming Israeli Turkish trade, tourist arrivals and diplomatic contacts in 2008, said recent Israeli censure was particularly unfair:

Israel regards Turkey's criticisms in the last year as a reflection of [the AKP's] increasingly Islamic propensities. Turkey rejects this strongly. [Turkey-Israel] relations peaked in 2008 on every level – six years after AKP's rise to power.⁷⁵

For now, Turkey's relations with Middle Eastern states are based on a host of common interests, not mainly on the idea of creating a Muslim or Islamist global option.⁷⁶ Western diplomats in Ankara tend to view Erdoğan's outbursts as emotional rather than established policy.⁷⁷ His Turkish supporters usually try to dilute comments like "a Muslim cannot commit genocide", not seize them

⁷⁰ "The [Persian] Gulf is more afraid of Iran as a hegemonic power". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

⁷¹ "One can talk of a certain populism, but this is also a necessary voice that needs to be raised for dignity's sake. Without this, all diplomatic activity is condemned to failure. You have to take account of the landscape of the Middle East". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

⁷² "We will build the future of the Middle East as a shareholding structure. This will strengthen not just the foundation and infrastructure of Turkey-Syria relations but also that of Middle East peace". Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, speech to businessmen in Syria, 23 December 2009.

⁷³ "The Middle East being named as a region of blood and tears makes our hearts ache". Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, speech on acceptance of King Faisal prize for "Service to Islam", Riyadh, 9 March 2010.

⁷⁴ "Is raising Turkey's trade volume with Syria a shifting of axis? Or is it normalisation? Of course it's normalisation". Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, speech in Syria, op. cit.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat in the Middle East, February 2010.

⁷⁶ Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership*, op. cit.

⁷⁷ On at least two occasions, Davutoğlu has privately told Western partners that Erdoğan's more radical statements were emotional outbursts rather than state policy. Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, February 2010.

as radical rallying cries.⁷⁸ A leading Turkish commentator agrees:

Turkey is not abandoning the West, and doesn't want to. The EU remains the main incentive for the reform process. I've never seen the parliament work day and night for anything else. We want Turkey to be a civilised modern country. Let's not forget that our priority is the West. But our posture in the world is enhanced by this policy [of Middle East activism].⁷⁹

There is also no doubt that under the AKP Turkey has made ground-breaking efforts to solve its problems with its Christian neighbours, the Armenians and Greek Cypriots, even if they have failed so far. A leading independent academic believes that the government of Turkey would be pursuing the same policies even if fate had made it Christian.⁸⁰ Conversely, AKP's embrace may have helped ensure the survival of the secular regime of mainly Muslim Syria.⁸¹ Some Syrians believe it is precisely the moderating influence of AKP's religious side that is appealing to Damascus, whose secularist regime has in the past bitterly fought opponents from the Muslim brotherhood.⁸²

Turkey's activism has not just been in Muslim or Middle Eastern countries either. Its concept of "High-Level Strategic Relationships" was pioneered with European countries. Facilitation between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina helped make the appointment of a Bosnian ambassador to Belgrade possible after several years of stalemate. Turkey is now also facilitating talks between Bosnia and Croatia. In January, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe elected an AKP deputy as its new president. In 2008, Turkey actively wooed

dozens of African states to win election to a non-permanent UN Security Council seat for 2009-2010. While AKP's foreign policy has sometimes been called "econo-Islamist",⁸³ it is pursuing the same trade relations with Russia⁸⁴ and African countries.⁸⁵

Politics have almost always been more important than religion. For example, Turkey's opposition to Anders Fogh Rasmussen's candidacy to become the new NATO Secretary General in 2009 had less to do with Muslim sensitivities over Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed than with bilateral secular objections: his protection of a Copenhagen-based satellite television station that speaks for the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), responsible for much bloodshed in Turkey; Rasmussen's opposition to Turkey's membership of the EU; the support for him by the leaders of France and Germany, who have done their utmost to block Turkey's process of convergence with the EU; and the way Turkey felt frozen out of prior consultations on the selection of a new secretary general by big EU states, despite having NATO's second biggest army and volunteering for many deployments in the military alliance.⁸⁶

C. THE TRADING STATE

Turkey's big economy produces the equivalent of half the entire output of the Middle East and North Africa, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and Israel.⁸⁷ Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has singled out economic inter-

⁷⁸ In an 11 November 2009 Turkish state television interview Erdoğan himself explained: "I can't talk comfortably to [Israeli prime minister] Netanyahu but I can comfortably talk to Bashir. I can easily say 'what you're doing is wrong'. I say it to his face. Why? A Muslim shouldn't do such a thing. A Muslim cannot commit genocide. If there is any such thing, we say so openly. Turkey is at ease with itself in this respect. It has that self-confidence, at least". www.cnnurk.com/2009/turkiye/11/08/erdogana.gore.darfurda.soykirim.yok/550901.0/index.html.

⁷⁹ Sami Kohen, speech, op. cit.

⁸⁰ "Turkey's regional politics are not mainly ideologically driven, but structurally driven. If Turkey was a successor of the Byzantine Empire and Christian, it would by and large pursue the same policies. ... there's more continuity than change". Crisis Group interview, Soli Özel, Istanbul, 1 March 2010.

⁸¹ AKP's moral and economic support came to the aid of Syria's highly secularist Baathist regime at its most vulnerable point in 2003-2004. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Syrian businessman, Damascus, 26 January 2010.

⁸³ Commentator Soner Çağaptay sees this policy as viewing the world from a perspective of religious and economic gains. "AKP'nin dış politikası Neo-Osmanlı değil [AKP's foreign policy is not Neo-Ottomanist]", *Referans*, 6 May 2009.

⁸⁴ Trade volume with Russia has more than doubled, from \$11 billion in 2004 to \$23 billion in 2009, thanks to Turkey's increasing energy imports. Although in 2009 Russia lost its "top trade partner" title to Germany, it is still Turkey's second largest trade relationship.

⁸⁵ 2005 was declared the year of Africa in Turkey by the AKP government. While still relatively small in volume – \$16 billion as of 2009 – Africa's share in Turkey's total exports rose from 5 per cent in 1996 to 10 per cent in 2009, mainly exports to north Africa.

⁸⁶ "They were registering their anger at the way the EU runs on a kind of secret code and secret handshakes done long in advance". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2010. In addition, Turkey's objections linked to the Danish cartoons on the grounds of Muslim sensitivities also made political sense because "all NATO's deployments are in the Muslim world". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

⁸⁷ The World Bank's report on the "Middle East and North Africa Region 2008 Economic Development and Prospects" showed total MENA gross domestic product in 2007 as \$1,593 billion; Turkey's the same year was about \$800 billion.

dependence as the most important tool allowing Turkey “to gain depth” in its neighbourhood, while pointing to the prominent role of private sector firms in driving the country’s foreign policy and strategic vision.⁸⁸ Alongside the efforts to create a broader free trade area, it has introduced a new and positive language of cooperation rather than conflict.⁸⁹ A leading Turkish academic believes that Davutoğlu’s “zero problems” with neighbours concept simply restates the foreign policy of a “trading state”.⁹⁰

Turkey wants to be an export-led power and has seen foreign trade grow steadily as a share of its overall economy.⁹¹ AKP regards regional trade as a “major synergy vehicle of continuous and sustainable economic development”, especially to strengthen relations with Islamic countries.⁹² Some economic initiatives clearly aim to reward domestic supporters of the AKP government.⁹³ While Turkey’s total exports grew four-fold in 1996-2009, exports to the 57 countries of the OIC soared seven-fold, reaching 28 per cent of total exports in 2009.⁹⁴

However, the expansionary trend favouring Muslim and Middle Eastern countries was well established before the AKP came to power. And even though Turkey’s trade with the Middle East has risen faster than trade with Europe in the past decade, this ratio rises and falls in line with oil prices. While the region took 22 per cent of Turkey’s exports in 1988, the share went down to 10 per cent in 1998 during the oil price swoon and in 2008 rose back to 19 per cent.⁹⁵ The Middle Eastern relationship is particularly lucrative. While Turkey runs a

deficit in its overall trade with the world, it had an \$8 billion surplus with the Middle East in 2009.⁹⁶

Iraq has historically been one of Turkey’s biggest trading partners. As it recovered from the crippling post-Kuwait invasion sanctions regime, total bilateral trade volume increased from \$900 million to \$6 billion between 2003 and 2009.⁹⁷ As of September 2009, 500 Turkish companies had invested in Iraq, and Turkey as a country was among the top ten foreign investors.⁹⁸ Turkish contractors are ubiquitous, building roads, bridges and other infrastructure projects.⁹⁹ In northern Iraq, Turkish companies now dominate markets for consumer goods, with penetration of over 80 per cent in some.¹⁰⁰ Ankara supplies electricity to the region and by March 2010 had signed 48 new agreements such as trade and development protocols. Turkey has acted as a conduit for oil exports and could do the same for gas as well.

With Syria, booming economic links have also cemented a new political friendship since 1999.¹⁰¹ The two sides had signed 51 protocols by March 2010 on trade, development and cultural exchanges, shelving for now differences over their long-standing disputes over Hatay and sharing the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.¹⁰² The \$1.7

⁸⁸ From an interview with Turkey’s foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, “İş dünyası artık dış politikanın öncülerinden [The business world is now among the leaders of foreign policy]”, *Turkishtime*, April-May 2004.

⁸⁹ “Who was speaking the language of economic interdependencies and diplomatic dialogue before that? Turkey used to be part of the zero-sum game, power- and proxy-politics that dominated the region”. Crisis Group interview, Meliha Altunışık, dean, International Relations Department, Middle East Technical University, Ankara 11 March 2010.

⁹⁰ Kemal Kirişçi, “The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 40, 2009, pp. 29-57.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* Several multinationals, such as Microsoft, BASF Chemical Company and Coca Cola among others, use Istanbul as a base for their regional operations in the Middle East, North Africa and sometimes Central Asia as well.

⁹² AKP’s 2007 party program, available on <http://eng.akparti.org.tr/english/partyprogramme.html#3.6>.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat in the Middle East, February 2010.

⁹⁴ Turkish Statistical Institute, www.tuik.gov.tr.

⁹⁵ In 2009, there was a 25 per cent drop in exports to the Middle East in line with a 23 per cent drop in Turkey’s overall exports. *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ “You can achieve more [trade growth] on the eastern front [than with Europe]”. Crisis Group interview, Bülent Aras, Middle East expert, Ankara, 11 February 2010. Turkey’s exports to Europe grew only 29 per cent in the last five years (compared to a 62 per cent increase in overall exports) and 274 per cent since 1996 (versus a 340 per cent overall growth). Turkish Statistical Institute, www.tuik.gov.tr.

⁹⁷ There was also a 60 per cent rise in exports in 2009, when Turkey’s overall exports shrank 23 per cent. Turkish Statistical Institute, www.tuik.gov.tr. Turkey mainly exports electrical machinery and equipment, parts and components, animal and plant oils, iron and steel.

⁹⁸ Dr. Khaled Salih, chief adviser to the Kurdistan Regional Government’s prime minister, as quoted in “Kuzey Irak’ta 500 Türk şirketi yatırım yapıyor [500 Turkish companies invest in northern Iraq]”, *Hürriyet*, 13 September 2009. Among Turkish investments in Iraq are Anadolu Group’s bottling facility in Arbil (opened in April 2008), Genel Enerji’s subsidiary Taq Taq Petroleum Refining Company, which invests in the Taq Taq field, and Pet Oil’s A&T Petroleum, which drills for oil.

⁹⁹ Rod Norland, “Rebuilding its economy, Iraq shuns U.S. businesses”, *The New York Times*, 12 November 2009.

¹⁰⁰ “Iraq-Turkey railway link re-opens”, BBC News, 16 February 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8518109.stm.

¹⁰¹ The tensions ended in 1999 when Syria expelled Turkish Kurd militant leader Abdullah Öcalan.

¹⁰² “As time passes and relations deepen, they will become easier to solve. ... on the Euphrates [water] issue, they have been honest and are committed to the amount they promised”. Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 1 February 2010.

billion volume of bilateral trade in 2009 makes up less than 1 per cent of Turkey's total trade, but exports to Syria nearly quadrupled during the past five years and rose almost 30 per cent in 2009 at a time when overall exports were contracting.¹⁰³

Indeed, some Syrian officials have begun to worry that the balance of payments is now in Turkey's favour, and wonder whether northern Syria, parts of which are only loosely connected to Damascus in terms of infrastructure, services and even identity, may slip into a Turkish sphere of influence.¹⁰⁴ The Al Jazeera satellite news service, generally pro-Turkish, aired a segment in February 2010 on Turkish goods putting Syrian merchants under pressure. As one Arab official put it:

Turkey talks about everything, solving problems, multilateral economic cooperation, interdependence. The only problem is that they are the main beneficiary. They have the industries, the skilled labourers. We have only oil and gas in our favour. Whether [Middle Eastern] countries will accept not having a balance of trade in their favour is questionable in the long term.¹⁰⁵

Turkish officials respond that Ankara felt the same competitive challenge when it opened its borders to a customs union with the EU in 1996, but that it was good for the country in the end.¹⁰⁶ Turkey is not just encouraging new legislation as its banks set up in Damascus, but also helping Syria work through the same painful process of liberalisation from state control that it started decades ago.¹⁰⁷ Some in Damascus believe this is good for Syria too, and that a first step of opening up to Turkish competition is preferable to opening the floodgates to an even more powerful Europe.¹⁰⁸ As an economic adviser to the Syrian government put it, "when [the banks] start moving in, we will benefit from secondary invest-

ments and transfers of technology, meaning that what the Turks took from Europe will impact us here. This will compensate the balance of trade deficit".¹⁰⁹

Despite the recent relative rise in Turkey's Middle East trade, it is important to keep the relationship in proportion with its overall interests and history. Even the Ottoman Empire was always more interested economically in the Balkans, then known as "Turkey-in-Europe". The EU has long been responsible for half the country's overall trade, a solid, multi-faceted relationship without the huge dependence on energy of the Russian or Iranian relationships. Even more importantly, nine-tenths of Turkey's foreign investment in 2008 came from the EU,¹¹⁰ the 200,000 Turkish workers and residents in the Middle East cannot be compared to more than four million in Europe, and, of Turkey's 27 million foreign visitors in 2009, only just over one-tenth came from the Middle East and North Africa.¹¹¹

D. BUILDING REGIONAL INTEGRATION

AKP leaders sometimes compare their harmonisation efforts in the Middle East with the EU's beginnings, implying an ambition to use economic integration to progress to political convergence.¹¹² Some EU officials recognise the similarities.¹¹³ As Prime Minister Erdoğan's chief foreign policy adviser, İbrahim Kalın, put it, "regional interdependence is making an environment of safety for yourself. And every single major issue involving Turkey has also been important to the EU or the U.S".¹¹⁴

Turkey is setting out to change a pattern in which Middle Eastern states do little to encourage intra-regional trade, jealously guard home markets and fear infrastructure links that might make them dependent on neigh-

¹⁰³ Turkish Statistical Institute, www.tuik.gov.tr. Turkey mainly exports cement, electricity, cables, pipes, oils, iron and steel construction parts to Syria. In 2009 Syria bought 1.5 billion KW/hours of electricity from Turkey, according to the Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK), a Turkish NGO.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials, January and February 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

¹⁰⁶ "There was some resistance to Free Trade Agreements in the beginning, but it's now seen to be mutually beneficial.... Customs Union forced us to begin producing quality products". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

¹⁰⁷ "This is a gradual transformation that will be good for all". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

¹⁰⁸ "It definitely is a challenge, but a challenge that we will benefit from standing up to". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 25 January 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 9 February 2010.

¹¹⁰ EU Progress Report 2009.

¹¹¹ 2009 figures, Turkish tourism ministry.

¹¹² "What is the European Union project? It is a way of abolishing all borders. In this part of the world we are accustomed to the idea of borders as strict as the Berlin Wall. But walls are being dismantled around the world. Why can't we do the same thing here? Of course, it will never be as structured, as rooted in law as is the case with the European Union. But it means that we look at Syria in a different way now, Iraq in a different way. Rather than state to state relations, it is more a question of improving people to people relations". İbrahim Kalın, interview in *al-Majalla*, 26 November 2009.

¹¹³ "Davutoğlu is a great admirer of the EU. He sees what the EU has achieved in making peace, stability and prosperity. He likes the EU model and is trying to implement it, with all the constraints that the region imposes". Crisis Group interview, EU official, Ankara, February 2010.

¹¹⁴ Middle East Institute speech, Washington DC, 9 October 2009.

bours who are often rivals. Most regimes traditionally prioritise strong bilateral relationships with powers outside the region¹¹⁵ but are now opening up to Turkey. Even Iran, arguably the country most reluctant to integrate economically with its neighbourhood, has voiced theoretical interest in joining in such early EU-style integration.¹¹⁶ According to a senior Syrian official:

The Turkish role is very constructive. We built this model of a strategic relationship. Jordan followed. Lebanon followed. Even Iran, some day, could join the scheme. Just imagine if this dynamic extended to the Gulf in the south, to Azerbaijan in the north. Believe it or not, the Georgian foreign ministry is coming here in relation with this scheme.¹¹⁷

Turkey's first step was to ease private travel. In late 2009, visa requirements were lifted for movement between Turkey and Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Libya, adding to the already automatic airport visa regime for Iran. This helped tourism from Middle East countries (excluding Israel) rise 16 per cent in 2008 and another 22 per cent in 2009.

Then border gates were opened wider. A new crossing was inaugurated with Syria and plans set in motion to remove the Cold War-era minefields on that border. Turkey is speeding up traffic through border points and aims to merge customs and passport formalities so there is just one joint Turkish-Syrian border post, not a separate one on each side of the frontier.

The railway line between Turkey, Syria and Iraq was reopened in February 2010, after investment of \$70 million.¹¹⁸ A fast train service will soon be added between the northern Syrian city of Aleppo and Turkey's south-eastern trading hub of Gaziantep. This activity is matched by new rail links recently tendered between Syria and Jordan and planned between Jordan and Saudi

Arabia – the line of the Ottoman Empire's old Hejaz Railway.¹¹⁹

Turkey is particularly interested in access to northern Iraqi gas to feed into the planned Nabucco trunk pipeline to central Europe and diversify its own sources of energy. Egypt's small-capacity Arab gas pipeline already runs from Egypt and Jordan and into Syria, and the stretch to the Turkish border is expected to be completed soon.¹²⁰ Ideas for a pan-Middle Eastern, seven-country electricity grid have languished for years, but since 2009 Turkey has been supplying Syria with power, as it has also done for years to northern Iraq. Friction over Turkish damming of the Euphrates-Tigris river system are giving way to talk of joint irrigation strategies, helped by recent good rainfall.¹²¹

Turkey has also moved from being a recipient of development aid to being a donor. It has been prominent in aid to Afghanistan, focusing on road-building, hospitals and schools for girls. It has brought 750 Palestinian police officers for training in Turkey. An industrial park on the border between Gaza and Israel has foundered during the current conflict, but a new Palestinian-Israeli-Turkish industrial zone, hospital, school and "peace campus" are being planned near Jenin on the West Bank, with entrances for some of the facilities open to both sides.¹²²

Turkish engagement is more likely to be long lasting and successful because it is multi-faceted. It includes senior, state-to-state cooperation, such as when in 2009 it negotiated "High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils" with Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, in which large numbers of cabinet ministers meet annually.¹²³ It has exchanged drafts of a similar arrangement with Libya. A senior Turkish official believes this is part of a realignment of the region towards economic cooperation and away from the politics of confrontation.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, former U.S. diplomat, Washington DC, November 2009.

¹¹⁶ Iranian Ambassador to Turkey Bahman Hosseinpour said, "why should we not have such cooperation? How could the friends in Europe do it? They had lots of wars among themselves. But fortunately ... they have the EU. If we have our consultation, if our relationships improve – something I am supporting – this will affect the region positively in many aspects. The others will follow us". *Hürriyet Daily News*, 21 February 2010.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 1 February 2010.

¹¹⁸ This is a leg of the Ottoman-era Berlin-Baghdad railway that closed after Turkey-Syria relations collapsed in the early 1980s. It was reopened in 2001 but had to close down again in 2003 after the U.S. invasion plunged Iraq into chaos.

¹¹⁹ "The elements of a regional integration are now being put in place, even if the interconnections have not yet been made". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 24 January 2010.

¹²⁰ "Gas quotas are currently insufficient to meet our own needs, regardless of Turkey's. But it's unclear to me whether there are political constraints [due to soured Syrian-Egyptian relations] or if the issue is merely capacity". Crisis Group telephone communication, Syrian petroleum expert, Damascus, 25 March 2010.

¹²¹ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy*, 14 December 2009.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

There is a conjunction between the transformation of Turkey, and the transformation of the Middle East. There is a state of affairs that puts some states out of business, and brings others in ... [In the joint Cabinet meetings] there is a real will, ten ministers on both sides, everyone with clear instructions. It works, and there is real follow-up.¹²⁴

The ambition is considerable, including a common free trade area already agreed between Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.¹²⁵ Beyond the early informal Turkish commercial engagement with Iraqi Kurdistan of the 1990s, Prime Minister Erdoğan speaks of his “excitement” and hopes that Turkey’s “model” dealings with Syria will show the way to better relations between Damascus, Riyadh and Beirut, and that the bilateral councils with Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon will lead to even further broadening:

When all these have been created, the region will be like a pool, and solidarity between us will strengthen. We’ve always believed that there is no meaning for Turkey to be in prosperity, peace and security on its own ... we are in a common region, sharing a common geography... if they have problem, it affects us too.¹²⁶

Turkey has also invested much diplomatic capital in increasing its profile in multilateral institutions and platforms. Turkey has become an observer at the Arab League and has hosted foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Istanbul. Just as significant was the victory of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu in the first democratically contested election to lead the OIC.¹²⁷ After the Israeli military action against Lebanon in 2006, Turkey also began contributing ships and 1,000 military personnel and engineers to support the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara March 2010.

¹²⁵ An official explained that Turkey wants “to create an area where goods move easily, where we have free trade agreements, and that’s now with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan”. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, March 2010.

¹²⁶ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, speech to businessmen in Syria, 23 December 2009.

¹²⁷ When Turkey in 2000 tried to promote a Turkish candidate in an earlier leadership contest in the Saudi-dominated OIC, he failed to win. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010. Non-Turkish members of the OIC are keenly aware of Turkey’s use of the organisation – and the 57 countries’ votes that it can influence in other international organisations – to promote narrow Turkish concerns such as recognition and support for the self-declared Turkish Republic of North Cyprus.

¹²⁸ For details, see www.tsk.tr/eng/uluslararasi/BM_UNIFIL.htm.

There is some scepticism in Arab states, whose leaders are used to signing protocols pledging cooperation that never quite come to life.¹²⁹ Turkey also may find it takes longer to achieve results since, unlike in the early days of its involvement with the EU, where everything was done multilaterally, most of what is being done now is still bilateral between it and individual Middle East states.

Unlike post-Second World War Europe, a desire to forge strong economic bonds as a way of consolidating peaceful relations is still lacking in the region. Commercial ties are fraught with political complications, for instance those between Syria on one side, and Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Iraq on the other. The difficulty in addressing key issues is illustrated by the absence of progress toward a Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi water-sharing agreement regarding the Euphrates, where a multilateral cooperation mechanism is urgently needed. Promoting free trade, facilitating transfers of technology and expertise and carrying out infrastructure integration projects all evoke a win-win attitude which has become a catchphrase of Turkish diplomacy, by contrast with the zero-sum equation that traditionally has dominated the region.¹³⁰

Even assuming the scheme succeeds in converting economic interdependence into political convergence, it would still leave out Israel, with which several key Arab states are loath to consider any form of “normalisation” pending breakthrough on an elusive peace process. If that happens, regional integration would entrench Israel’s sense of isolation, bolster an Arab front whose disunity has long been a crucial asset to Israel and place Turkish and Israeli interests further at odds. However, the lack of much multilateral political integration means Ankara’s ability to rally regional states remains weak. Change is compelling, nevertheless, at the people-to-people level. Turkish capital, films, television series, music and products are putting down roots in Middle Eastern markets, and the convergence that has followed is not all one way. Ten years after the foundation of CNN’s Turkish TV, Al Jazeera is opening a Turkish news channel. So far, Turkey appears to have had more success on the political side than it did with similar outreach to Turkic countries in Central Asia in the 1990s.¹³¹

¹²⁹ “The Turks are newcomers. Okay, they’ve signed 50 agreements with Syria, 50 with Iraq. It’s a positive step. But they’re treating them like they’ve already produced results”. Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, January 2010.

¹³⁰ “Davutoğlu is very keen that Turkey should play the role of catalyst in changing the paradigm”. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

¹³¹ “When we went like this to the Turkic countries [of Central Asia], this [convergence] didn’t happen. But I think it will with states that are closer by, have similar laws and are

III. TURKEY AS FACILITATOR

With its growing self-confidence, Turkey under the AKP has presented itself as a facilitator, mediator and convenor of rival parties in several regional conflicts. This role has won it widespread favourable notice in Western capitals, domestic opinion and regional media. Besides stabilising its own backyard, a goal of this activism is also to increase regional prosperity, and thus Turkish trade.¹³²

The AKP government began this activism modestly, after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, by organising meetings of Sunni Muslim leaders from that country, playing a supporting role in trying to bring them into the new American-brokered order. AKP leaders have also tried to lessen tensions between the U.S. and Iran, Iraq and Syria, Israel and Syria, Israel and the Palestinians, Hamas and Fatah and the various actors in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In each case, Turkey's role gradually became more prominent. Trilateral meetings with Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance, built up over four rounds in Istanbul, first including the leaders only to create confidence, then adding ministers who dealt with the economy, then including military and security ministers and finally a meeting that addressed the fundamental issue of how to bring their education system onto a more reasonable track than that espoused by fundamentalist religious schools.¹³³

Turkey is in the rare position of being able to speak to all sides of the Middle East's conflicts. Outsiders gave it some credit in 2009 for nudging the factions in Lebanon closer prior to the Doha summit. Turkey asserts, somewhat inconclusively, that it has contributed to bringing Damascus closer to Riyadh and Beirut, even that it was the prime mover behind reciprocal visits by the Syrian and Saudi leaders.¹³⁴ Hosting four rounds of meetings to defuse Syrian-Iraqi tensions after a series of bombings in Iraq had at least the effect of clarifying

the position of the two countries, which ultimately did not escalate their arguments.¹³⁵

However, the Turkish impact is often slight. The flurry of facilitation efforts is not universally popular. Diplomats in Ankara often use words like "mania", "frenzy" and "obsession" when describing the phenomenon.¹³⁶

The Turks are obsessed with becoming mediators. They believe they've invented the wheel. But even a superpower can't pay full attention to more than two or three issues. If you spread yourself too thin, you'll lose credibility. Turkey will become a laughing stock, nobody will take it seriously. Everyone will think it's just doing it for the show. You see how Swiss mediators did it with Armenia, the Germans did it with Hezbollah – that's how mediation should be done: behind closed doors.¹³⁷

Indeed, some Turkish officials, aware of the immensity of their task, underline that they categorise Turkish brokering as "facilitation" rather than "mediation".¹³⁸ They say Syria, Fatah, Afghanistan and Pakistan had all invited them to become involved. One official took a pragmatic approach:

The priority is not mediation or conflict resolution per se; we are not really achieving many results, and that's perhaps not the point anyway. The point is to be visible, to look like a power, to make our neighbours like us, to achieve stability which will help economic growth and to increase trade and investments.¹³⁹

A. SYRIA-ISRAEL PROXIMITY TALKS

The Turkish facilitation effort that attracted most domestic and international attention was five rounds of indirect talks brokered between Syria and Israel in 2008, aiming to pave the way for direct negotiations and, ultimately, a peace deal and the return of Syria's Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since 1967. It was the result of years of preparation that began in 2004¹⁴⁰ and included Turkish NGOs facilitating contacts between Pal-

culturally closer." Crisis Group interview, Hasan Kanbolat, director, Centre for Middle East Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Ankara, 10 February 2010.

¹³² "Economic growth and conflict resolution feed into each other. Simply put: resolving conflicts in the area generates economic growth". Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, Tel Aviv, February 2010.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

¹³⁴ Prime Minister Erdoğan, interview with Al Arabiya television, 14 October 2009.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 1 February 2010.

¹³⁶ "This can be termed 'mediation mania', as Turkey's search for 'grandeur' with such methods looks a bit ridiculous". Efraim Inbar, "Israeli-Turkish Tensions and Beyond", op. cit.; Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, February-March 2010.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, January 2010.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat in the Middle East, February 2010.

¹⁴⁰ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°63, *Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, 10 April 2007.

estinians and Israelis, notably in Gaza.¹⁴¹ Turkey also was moving into a vacuum left by U.S. disengagement from Syria-Israel contacts at the time.¹⁴²

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert expressed interest in Turkish help in organising indirect talks with Syria in February 2007.¹⁴³ The meetings were announced and started in 2008, reaching a climax in a fifth round in late December of that year. Erdoğan and Olmert joined their negotiators in Ankara and met for over five hours. They had dinner, and Erdoğan spoke extensively to Bashar al-Assad by telephone. Erdoğan said, “our goal then, to see if we could move to the next phase which was direct talks between Israel and Syria ... has been to achieve peace in the region”.¹⁴⁴

When Israel’s Operation Cast Lead started against Gaza a few days later, Erdoğan, shocked and betrayed at what he felt were personal commitments from Olmert, angrily suspended the process. An Arab diplomatic observer criticised Turkish leaders for naively believing the process was real, when in his view Syria and Israel were almost exclusively using the process to give a mere appearance of peaceful intentions.¹⁴⁵ Yet, Turkey’s leadership remains convinced that it was on the point of breaking through to direct Syrian-Israeli negotiations.¹⁴⁶

It seems unlikely that Turkey can resume its role with the current Israeli government.¹⁴⁷ Divisions in Israel on the value of the Turkey relationship¹⁴⁸ mean it is unlikely to be a mediator with Syria for the time being.¹⁴⁹ One neutral outsider saw “severe structural damage has been done to the Turkey-Israel relationship”.¹⁵⁰ The new government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu views talks with Syria as a secondary priority, and if there are to be any, both Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Lieberman say they want a fresh start and direct talks.¹⁵¹ While Syria has insisted on a resumption of the Turkish role,¹⁵² Netanyahu has indicated he would prefer French mediation.¹⁵³ Besides, U.S. President Obama’s administration is much more involved in Arab-Israeli matters than was its predecessor in 2007-2008.

Still, Turkey’s engagement in 2008 did produce changes. Syria was able to break out of its isolation. Discussions were substantive and structured. Syria prepared its domestic opinion for the talks and saw that Israel was to some extent prepared to defy U.S. opposition to engagement with Damascus. The two sides were surprised by the level of consensus on the history of their negotiations. Both were forced to clarify their positions. Syria placed six points on a map, showing its definition of the border line prior to the 1967 war to which it would like Israel to withdraw. Israel did not accept

¹⁴¹ For instance, it was meetings and contacts hosted by the Turkish Union of Chambers of Commerce that eventually led to a joint Israeli-Palestinian-Turkish industrial zone between Gaza and Israel, though as noted above, this has foundered during the current conflict.

¹⁴² “Turkey played a useful role, while all were waiting for the U.S. to step in, and it didn’t seem interested in restarting the Syria-Israel track”. Crisis Group interview, Nathalie Tocci, researcher, Washington DC, November 2009.

¹⁴³ See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards (I)*, op. cit., and N°93, *Reshuffling the Cards (II): Syria’s New Hand*, 16 December 2009.

¹⁴⁴ Comments at World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, 29 January 2009.

¹⁴⁵ “Like all beginners in the Middle East, the Turks thought that plenty of apparent success at the beginning meant that they were making real progress, that they were succeeding where others had failed; it turned their heads. ... the Turks say they were one day short of an agreement, or of direct negotiations. I think it was the usual thing. All were benefiting from the process. The Syrians broke their isolation. The Israelis demonstrated peaceful intent. The Turks proved they could be mediators. It could have gone on for another two years. It was useful. But don’t tell me they were on the verge of something new”. Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, December 2009.

¹⁴⁶ As Erdoğan put it, “we were making quite good progress, so much so that we were having problems with a few words only, in the language that we were talking”. World Economic Forum, Davos, 29 January 2009.

¹⁴⁷ “You could excuse [Erdoğan’s anti-Israel polemics] for domestic consumption once, twice or three times, but he keeps going. He says he’s emotional, but I don’t see the emotion on other questions.” Crisis Group interview, person with knowledge of Israeli policy in the region, February 2010.

¹⁴⁸ “Attempts by the Israeli and Turkish governments to reduce tensions are not likely to restore the substance and tone that characterized the bilateral relationship of the 1990s”. Efraim Inbar, “Israeli-Turkish Tensions and Beyond”, op. cit.

¹⁴⁹ “What Turkey can do is limited.” Crisis Group interview, person with knowledge of Israeli policy in the region, February 2010.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

¹⁵¹ “Lieberman: Israel wants direct talks with PA, Syria and Saudis”, *Haaretz*, 16 June 2009. However, Israel has also said it would welcome Turkey back into the role in return for better Israel-Turkey relations. “Israel wants Turkey back on board as mediator with Syria”, *Haaretz*, 22 November 2009.

¹⁵² “Syria stressed its adherence to the Turkish mediator in any indirect negotiations with Israel because Turkey is an important country in the region and because of its honest role in previous indirect negotiations”. Bouthaina Shaaban, Syrian presidential and media adviser, lecture at Homs University, Syrian news agency, November 2009.

¹⁵³ Netanyahu said he told French President Nicolas Sarkozy that “I preferred direct talks, but if we must have a mediator, he should mediate”. Ynet, 12 July 2009.

these points but did make a more precise commitment to withdraw to whatever line was eventually agreed.¹⁵⁴

There are strong arguments in favour of a continued Turkish role: Turkey is the country that enjoys most leverage on Syria; in Damascus itself, Ankara's new regional weight is a key enabling factor; it is a way for Turkey and Israel to rebuild their relationship; and Turkey is the repository of what happened during the 2008 talks, which can be built upon.

Some Israelis continue to see potential value in the fact that Turkey is so influential with the Syrian leadership.¹⁵⁵ Syria and Israel both noted that Turkey's broad regional influence ensures that commitments made by the two sides in its presence are harder to go back on.¹⁵⁶ A senior Turkish official pointed out Israel never complained about the actual handling of the proximity talks.¹⁵⁷ One official believes that in private everyone acknowledged that the Israeli attack on Gaza interrupted the Syria process, not any action by Turkey, and that eventually Israel will welcome Turkish involvement again.¹⁵⁸

B. CONCILIATION WITH IRAN

Turkey has tried hard to maintain a good relationship with Iran's Islamic Republic, engaging in a procession of high-level visits in both directions, trade deals and efforts to pass messages to and from Western powers and Tehran. It is interested in economic expansion,¹⁵⁹ avoiding any new sanctions regime or armed conflict in the region, delaying any Iranian effort to obtain nuclear

weapons and offering a counter-balance to Iran's efforts to increase its influence.

Turkey's outreach has underlined how different its approach is compared to that of its Western partners. In August 2008, it welcomed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on an official visit. Turkish leaders effusively congratulated him on his controversial re-election in June 2009. Prior to an October 2009 visit to Tehran, Erdoğan asserted that he shared a common vision of the region with Iran and said of its president, "there is no doubt he is our friend ... we have had no difficulty at all".¹⁶⁰ He has repeatedly called the idea that Iran has a military nuclear program "just gossip".¹⁶¹

Exports to Iran rose more than seven-fold, from \$300 million to \$2 billion, between 2002-2009,¹⁶² defying U.S. attempts to isolate Tehran. By far the biggest number of tourists to Turkey from the Middle East are Iranians, – 1.38 million in 2009 – often seeking relaxation on the country's free-wheeling Mediterranean Riviera. In so doing, they are exposed to a Muslim society at peace with the world, economically advanced and where Islamic traditions coexist with Western patterns of consumption, commerce and secular institutions. This makes it likely that Turkey is influencing Iran rather than vice versa, especially given that about one quarter of Iranians speak Azeri Turkish, and Turkish satellite television shows are seen all over the country.¹⁶³

This sustained engagement at the leadership, regime and popular levels helps Turkey to a broader understanding of the decision-making process in Iran and a chance to interact with it. At the same time, Iran is made to feel less cornered, isolated and tempted towards unpredictable actions. However, this conceptually appealing approach has not yet produced in practice any great changes of Iranian policy.

Turkey is dependent on Iran mainly for energy, while Iran relies on Turkey for one of its key routes west. Ankara has contracted with Iran for about one-fifth of

¹⁵⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Reshuffling the Cards (II)*, op. cit.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ "We controlled it, there were no leaks. We do things seriously". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, March 2010. "Olmert found Turkish mediation very useful, it was quiet, successful mediation. ... the Turks went in very prudently". Crisis Group interview, person with knowledge of Israeli policy in the region, Ankara, February 2010.

¹⁵⁸ "If the track is reopened, it will be difficult to circumvent Turkey. It's not that we necessarily have to be the mediator, but we have to be involved in one way or the other. And the Syrian position is that Turkey will be on board". Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, Tel Aviv, February 2010.

¹⁵⁹ "Iran is a deep country with huge trade potential". Crisis Group interview, Bülent Aras, Middle East expert, Ankara, 12 February 2010. In the last five years overall trade volume grew 96 per cent, led by a 152 per cent surge in Turkey's exports. Turkey's exports remained stable at around \$2 billion. Main exports to Iran include machinery, equipment, iron and steel, motor vehicles, wood, plastic goods, tobacco and tobacco substitutes. "Iran Country Profile", Republic of Turkey Undersecretariat of the Prime Ministry for Foreign Trade, available in Turkish on www.dtm.gov.tr.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with the *Guardian*, 26 October 2009.

¹⁶¹ Erdoğan most recently said this in a press statement in London. Agence France-Presse, 16 March 2010. However, other AKP leaders say privately they are convinced that Iran, both as a regime and as a country, is dedicated to acquiring a nuclear weapon.

¹⁶² Turkish State Institute of Statistics.

¹⁶³ "One of the allegations of the secularists is that the AKP administration is turning into a regime like Iran's half-democracy, half-religious state. There's no reason to take this claim seriously once you've compared the histories, cultures and politics of Turkey and Iran; the chance of Turkey becoming Iran is zero. I think it will be precisely the reverse". Şahin Alpay, *Zaman*, 9 February 2010.

its natural gas imports but recently has run up bills for unfulfilled take-or-pay contracts.¹⁶⁴ Many of the 90,000 Turkish trucks carrying products and servicing Turkish businesses in Central Asia pass through Iran.¹⁶⁵

The relationship has been far from smooth. Since 1996, Turkey has signed a number of major memorandums of understanding on the development of Iran's huge South Pars gas field, dam building and a refinery in northern Iran, but there is no clarity about when these will be implemented. In 2004, Iran's Revolutionary Guards seized control of Tehran's new Turkish-built Imam Khomeini Airport, due to be operated by a mainly Turkish consortium, and a mobile phone tender won by a Turkish company was cancelled. The Iranian parliament formally rescinded both contracts, accusing the firms of ties to Israel that would damage Iranian security.¹⁶⁶

Turkey tried to use its high-profile relationships with both Iran and the U.S. to help broker a compromise that would defuse the crisis over Iran's nuclear program, most notably prior to Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Washington in 2009.¹⁶⁷ The apparent Iranian readiness, at times, to consider Turkey as a place where its enriched uranium could be stored, showed both the existence of a special relationship and its limits. Diplomats say neither Iran nor the U.S. are ready to let Turkey be the main mediator; Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki preferred to call Turkey an "important consultant ... which can help others understand Iran better".¹⁶⁸

Turkish officials point out that no other member of the Western alliance has Turkey's regular access to the highest level of the Iranian leadership and that they engage Tehran with the EU and U.S. in mind.¹⁶⁹ If winning time is a success, Turkey's calming interventions have contributed to that, helping pave the way to the talks in Switzerland in September 2009 between Iran and the five

permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany.¹⁷⁰ The European Commission says "Turkey supports the EU position on Iran's nuclear program".¹⁷¹

A leading Turkish analyst defended engagement with Iran as serving to help ease tensions and broaden the diplomatic room for manoeuvre between Iran and the West and as having "strengthened Turkey's position in the West".¹⁷² Another Turkish argument is that it is counterbalancing the rise of Iran's influence in the Middle East, especially giving Syria an opportunity to diversify its ties or even end its Iran alliance.¹⁷³ Indeed, Damascus appears to feel less dependent on Tehran.¹⁷⁴

Erdoğan surprised U.S. interlocutors, however, when he equated an Israeli nuclear capability with an Iranian one.¹⁷⁵ Some see this not as facilitation but a strategic shift that undermines both Turkey and the Western alliance. The willingness of Turkey to be conciliatory toward Iran's hardline regime is puzzling to outsiders, given the possibility that it could be the first threatened by a nuclear-capable Tehran. Turkey is in no doubt that Iranian society supports the nuclear program and one Turkish leader has indicated his belief that a nuclear weapon is the aim.¹⁷⁶ But a senior Turkish official defended the substance of the AKP position:

The essence is engagement. It's easy for the West to talk, like a bachelor saying he'll just divorce his wife [because he doesn't have one]. We're close by; we don't have that luxury. Even if they have a different mentality, and thrive on things which are painful to us, you won't get much by isolating a country, especially not a big country with strategic depth.¹⁷⁷

¹⁶⁴ In 2009, for instance, it may have to pay over \$800 million for unused gas, though it then has the right to import the corresponding volumes over the subsequent five years. Crisis Group interview, David Tonge, managing director, International Business Services, Istanbul, January 2010.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

¹⁶⁶ The Iranian government was sharply divided on the issue, and the Turkish side dismissed any such ties to Israel. "Iranian MPs vote for Turkish veto", BBC News, 27 September 2004.

¹⁶⁷ "The prime minister was very excited about this, convinced he would be able to have a role between Tehran and Washington". Crisis Group interview, leading Turkish business person, January 2010.

¹⁶⁸ *Hürriyet Daily News*, 16 February 2010.

¹⁶⁹ "The policy of engagement is a key principle. You can't just talk to good guys; you have to talk to the difficult actors as well". Ibrahim Kalin, Middle East Institute speech, op. cit.

¹⁷⁰ Bülent Aras, "In a dead end with Iran?", *Sabah*, 24 February 2010.

¹⁷¹ "Turkey 2009 Progress Report", European Commission, Brussels, 14 October 2009.

¹⁷² Bülent Aras, "In a dead end with Iran?", *Sabah*, 24 February 2010.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Washington DC, November 2009.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, January 2010.

¹⁷⁵ "Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is a dangerous situation for both our region and for the whole world. ... But, now, you are saying to one country not to do this, but right in geographic proximity, a neighbouring country has those weapons. ... you have applied a double standard and [are] making it look like the justified one". Speech, Washington DC, 7 December 2009.

¹⁷⁶ "I do believe it is their final aspiration to have a nuclear weapon in the end". President Gül, quoted in Claudia Rosett, "Turkey Tilts Towards Iran", *Forbes.com*, 26 March 2010. Gül's office said on 27 March 2010 the president "had not given an interview", but did not deny the substance of his comments.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, November 2009.

A Turkish commentator took issue with Western hardliners, saying uncompromising approaches had not been fully thought through, especially given the differences in the Western alliance about the use of military force and the complexities of Iran:

While offering carrots, you should not wave the stick. Engagement is not just about talk. One should view Iran as a whole. In comparison with other countries in the region, Iran is better in democracy, its people are not so religious, even if the regime uses Islam as its ideology. One should try to encourage this side of the country and not categorise it as a country that cannot change. One should believe in the merit of democracy imposing itself.¹⁷⁸

The sharpest criticism of Turkey's approach to Iran comes from American and Israeli commentators.¹⁷⁹ Some U.S. officials have privately welcomed Turkey's efforts to be a go-between with Tehran,¹⁸⁰ while requesting Turkish leaders to rein in their rhetoric.¹⁸¹ Turkey as a UN Security Council member will face a test of its loyalties if matters come to a showdown there with Iran over sanctions. If forced to choose, Turkey will probably vote with the West on sanctions, but only after all other options are exhausted and in such a way that Iran could not single Turkey out for blame.¹⁸² There is currently no sign that Turkey will have any future role as an alternate channel of communication. In the meantime, it remains unclear what Ankara's engagement with Tehran benefits most: the cause of global stability, Turkey's image as a regional actor or the agenda of the Iranian regime.

C. OPENING UP TO HAMAS

Some of Turkey's efforts at Middle Eastern facilitation have only had minor impact. Typical of the less-successful engagements is the attempt to facilitate peaceful outcomes to conflicts involving the militant Palestinian faction Hamas. Turkey is convinced that Hamas cannot

be ignored,¹⁸³ even though, from an Israeli point of view, there is a contradiction between its handling of Hamas and the PKK.¹⁸⁴ As Prime Minister Erdoğan often makes clear:

If we would like to see democracy take root, then we must respect, first of all, the people who have received the votes of the people of the country.... If we are trying to bridge that gap, then we have to consider all the parties. ... if it's only Fatah who is present on the Palestinian side, that is not going to be sufficient to project the results to all of the Palestinian people, Hamas has to be taken into consideration as well because they are a part of that society, they have won an election, so they too must be included in this equation.¹⁸⁵

Turkey went as far as to invite Hamas's leader, Khaled Meshal, to Ankara. Then in January 2009, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu launched one of the most high-profile Turkish interventions to date, shuttling between Hamas's offices in Damascus and Cairo in an effort to broker a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel.¹⁸⁶ While Davutoğlu claimed the major role for Turkey in the 18 January cessation of hostilities,¹⁸⁷ Arab diplomats say it was only a minor contributor,¹⁸⁸ and others believe it had no impact at all.¹⁸⁹ Some went as far as to assert Turkey's efforts suffered from inexperience, over-enthusiasm and overblown expectations that Hamas would reveal all its cards to them.¹⁹⁰

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, March 2010.

¹⁷⁹ A leading Israeli analyst called it "the most indicative Turkish behaviour demonstrating an Islamic coloration of Turkey's foreign policy". Efraim Inbar, "Israeli-Turkish Tensions and Beyond", op. cit.

¹⁸⁰ A Western diplomat in Ankara said that Turkey works with the U.S. on its talks with Iranian officials and briefs U.S. officials fully. Crisis Group interview, February 2010.

¹⁸¹ "We don't need them to label Iran [as their misunderstood friend]. We need them to work with us to make sure that Iran doesn't become nuclear weapons-capable ... to find a common tactical approach". James Steinberg, Deputy U.S. Secretary of State, interview with the *Financial Times*, 24 February 2010.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, March 2010.

¹⁸³ "Without Hamas, you aren't going to have a process. Isolation hasn't worked". İbrahim Kalın, Middle East Institute speech, op. cit.

¹⁸⁴ Turkey is vociferous in its criticism of the PKK's terrorist attacks against civilian targets but says nothing about the attacks against civilian targets by Hamas. Similarly, it reserves the right to attack the PKK in Iraq but criticizes Israel for attacking Hamas in Gaza.

¹⁸⁵ World Economic Forum, Davos, 29 January 2009.

¹⁸⁶ "He came to us offering to help. We told him, 'yes, please help. Tell Hamas to listen to the Egyptians! It's all fine, as long as you're a moderating influence on them'". Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, January 2010.

¹⁸⁷ "If a bilateral cease-fire was obtained ... this was possible because of Turkey". Quoted in *Today's Zaman*, 21 January 2009.

¹⁸⁸ "Turkey had a small role in softening Hamas". Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official, January 2010.

¹⁸⁹ Hamas leaders told Crisis Group that Turkey was not able to play a role, because Egypt vetoed it in order to monopolise the talks, and that U.S. officials at the time backed Egypt up. This account was confirmed by U.S. officials. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas and U.S. officials, February-March 2010.

¹⁹⁰ "I'm not saying it achieved zero. It's just not the level of achievement they claim; it should be put in the right context. I understand the propaganda. We do it all the time. The trou-

Ankara is clearly still at the beginning of a learning curve in its Middle Eastern engagements and a short way along the road that remains to be travelled to any Arab-Israeli peace. Hamas ultimately may have listened more to Tehran than to Ankara,¹⁹¹ even if some Turkish officials say it is a success that Ankara won any influence with the group.

Turkey's arrival on the Middle East scene sometimes disturbs the traditional heavyweight player in Arab-Israel conflicts, Egypt. Cairo keeps a close guard on its intra-Palestinian role and its strong ties with Fatah.¹⁹² While Turkish and Egyptian diplomats officially maintain that they cooperated harmoniously, not everybody involved believes the process was smooth. As an Egyptian official put it:

Turkey is a large and clumsy player. We follow what they do with both interest and scepticism. They haven't been versed in Middle Eastern issues for a long time. They're motivated by public opinion, and their Islamic leanings are never very far in the background. Finally, they would like to prove to the West that they are an effective player. But I have my doubts about their concrete impact. The expression "much ado about nothing" fits. They're doing well in terms of media coverage and air miles.¹⁹³

Arab diplomats say the lack of Turkish impact on the Fatah-Hamas axis was like other ideas that rose only to disappear, including a mooted mediation role in Somalia,¹⁹⁴ or those that have never gone further than private suggestions, like mediation between Egypt and Morocco.¹⁹⁵ Some say Turkey may not fully understand the bitter, complex legacies of the past few decades.

They believe in speaking with Hamas or Fatah softly. They say things like "goodwill", "we Muslims should stick together". That's the sort of thing you say to a child at school. It sounds naïve. They talk about 600 years of Ottoman rule. But do they know the conditions today?¹⁹⁶

Nevertheless, regional actors acknowledge that Turkey has unprecedented energy.¹⁹⁷ An Egyptian official pointed out: "Davutoğlu is treated like royalty by our media. He is a star in Egypt. And Erdoğan is a star in the whole Arab world".¹⁹⁸ But that is different from being a mediator,¹⁹⁹ and some Arab officials question Turkey's intentions.²⁰⁰ One Turkish expert indeed believes that at times Turkey moves beyond either facilitation or mediation to actually trying to impose its will.

They haven't had much success, but success depends on how you define it. By engaging, you get a new role, and AKP has got Turkey that. But they have moved out of the role of being a neutral mediator to that of being a power mediator. If you are going to do power mediation, there is a question about whether you really have the power to make people do what you want, and do groups like Hamas really listen to you? Have you thought things through, like the internal contradictions, such as speaking to Hamas and not to the DTP [domestic Turkish Kurd nationalists]? Also, there's a cost as people perceive [as in cases involving Israel] you have lost the role of neutral mediator.²⁰¹

ble is that Turkey rushes in, believes its own rhetoric and believes that it's actually making peace. Hamas is talking to everyone, but the Turks behave as if only Turkey is talking to them". Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, January 2010.

¹⁹¹ "Davutoğlu is an idealist, a true believer, but he is learning the hard way, getting frustrated by the stubbornness of Hamas. They still need to learn". Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, January 2010.

¹⁹² "Egypt will only consider efforts to support its attempt to get Hamas to sign 'the agreement' [with Fatah]. Abu Mazen [Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas] won't talk to anyone about this issue. He's signed already and sees Egypt as the one and only gateway. That closes the door to anyone else". Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official, Cairo, February 2010.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Somalia would have been "overreach", according to one Turkish official. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2009.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official, January 2010.

¹⁹⁷ Prime Minister Erdoğan described his role in contacts for a Lebanese government with Beirut, Damascus and Riyadh: "We too lived that tense period in the strangest way. We were on the telephone the whole time". Interview with Al Arabiya television, 14 October 2009.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2010.

¹⁹⁹ "The Turks have to decide what they want to be. Mediation can't be done without being neutral". Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Ankara, January 2010.

²⁰⁰ "All this mediation – is it really for peace? We are very emotional, but we have to be cautious". Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Meliha Altunışık, dean, International Relations Department, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 12 February 2010.

IV. LIMITS TO AMBITION

Turkey has made grand declarations about its ability to fix things in the Middle East on behalf of the West, and to fix things in the West as a spokesperson for the Middle East and even the Muslim world. While it is clearly carrying more weight than before, there are several constraints to its influence.²⁰²

A. MIDDLE EASTERN PERCEPTIONS OF TURKEY

Public opinion in the Arab world has been broadly appreciative of Turkey's appearance on the regional stage. A tipping point for interest and trust was the 1 March 2003 vote in the Turkish parliament to refuse passage to U.S. troops on their way to invade Iraq.²⁰³ It was also strengthened, ironically, by Turkey's push for integration with Europe in the 2000s and the official opening of membership negotiations in 2005.²⁰⁴

The neighbouring countries began to see Turkey as European. Countries everywhere began moving Turkey from Middle East departments to Europe departments. Intellectuals and middle classes changed their view of Turkey. That's why people and investments began coming. They saw a culture close to them, but also close to Europe. The closer we get to Europe, the closer the Middle East wants to get to us.²⁰⁵

In 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan's wave of forthright, biting criticism of Israel caught the imagination of Arab citizens in want of a strong voice that could express their anger at the plight of Palestinian civilians trapped in Gaza at a time that the complaints of most Arab rulers were more commonplace and subdued. The Arab press has excelled itself in praise of Erdoğan, saying in one

editorial, "we propose that Mr. Erdoğan should open an academy in Istanbul to teach Arab leaders some lessons in dignity and how to serve their people".²⁰⁶

But, beyond giving voice to frustrations, it is hard to find people in the region who call on Turkey to take extreme positions. More often than not, it is precisely because of Turkey's overall moderate approach and ties to the West that its firm stance is seen as a model. Many commentators shared this basic analysis: "Turkey seems confident, moving firmly along the new path of its foreign policy, without any noise or foolish posturing of the Iranian sort. It is behaving like a major regional power, relying on its past and present, and aiming to absorb the smaller players in the region, including Israel".²⁰⁷ A Turkish poll taken in seven Arab countries appears to corroborate strong public interest in Turkey as a democratic example.²⁰⁸

One manager of a Saudi bank said there was anxiety mixed with admiration of Turkey after Erdoğan's Davos outburst (see below), pointing out that Arab money wants to see a Turkey where EU-style rules and regulations apply, not a country that is turning its back on EU integration.²⁰⁹ This is especially true because Turkey is viewed as a new channel through which to represent Muslim and Middle Eastern points of view in Western forums, which will not work if it is distrusted by the West.

Alongside politics, Turkish products and construction companies have impressed Middle Eastern consumers. The country's new quality of life has been showcased by highly popular Turkish sitcoms and soap operas dubbed into Arabic.²¹⁰ One series, "Gümüş", a flop at home, created such a stir in the Middle East that Arab tourists visit the Bosphorus-side villa in which it was filmed, and a

²⁰²"The EU perspective is gradually disappearing, but the government is exaggerating the importance of the Middle East. I think there is a special place for the Middle East. But it's not an alternative. There are many limitations". Ibid.

²⁰³"A turning point was the 2003 war, when Ankara proved it was able to say 'no' to the U.S. This is a new model in the region. We used to have countries who always said 'yes' and others who always said 'no'. Here you have a country setting a course of its own, saying sometimes 'yes', sometimes 'no'. Crisis Group interview, Bülent Aras, expert on Middle East, Ankara, 12 March 2010.

²⁰⁴Some 250 correspondents from the wider Muslim world outnumbered European correspondents covering the December 2004 decision on whether or not to grant Turkey the right to negotiate for full EU membership.

²⁰⁵Crisis Group interview, Hasan Kanbolat, director, Centre for Middle East Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Ankara, 10 February 2010.

²⁰⁶Editorial in London-based pan-Arab *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 16 October 2009.

²⁰⁷Hassan Haidar, London-based pan-Arab *al-Hayat*, 15 January 2010.

²⁰⁸Among 2,000 respondents, 61 per cent saw Turkey as a potential model; 63 per cent valued its integration of Islam and democracy; 71 per cent said it has a growing influence on them; 76 per cent believed it has the potential to make intra-Arab peace; 77 per cent wanted it to play a bigger role; 78 per cent said it was a friend of the respondent's Arab government; and 79 per cent said it should play a mediating role in the Israel-Palestine problem. Significantly, 64 per cent said they believe EU membership makes Turkey a more convincing partner for the Arab world. Survey by the reputed Turkey Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV). Some have criticised the poll for being done by telephone.

²⁰⁹Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, February 2010.

²¹⁰"I travel widely and I see them from Iran to Morocco. Sometimes different series are running on three channels at once". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, March 2010.

Kuwaiti couple paid a small fortune to stage their marriage there.

It showed a quality of life, of human relations, an ideal modern Muslim family, in which a man who prays also treats his wife with respect, all against the beautiful background of the Bosphorus skyline. You can't imagine the popularity, after decades of seeing Turkey as atheist, anti-Islam, anti-Arab, the friend of Israel that abolished the caliphate. Suddenly we see a new Turkey. The Arab street is not only fascinated by Erdoğan, but by the phenomenon of Turkey.²¹¹

Among Arab officials, sharp divisions of analysis remain. Some Arab states have embraced Turkey's arrival on the scene.²¹² King Abdullah's visit in 2006 was the first from a Saudi Arabian monarch in many decades. A Syrian official said of his country's own perception:

If Turkey didn't exist, we'd have to invent it. There's an Arab vacuum. Turkey is good for us because it draws attention to the absolute lack of Arab initiatives. We in Syria are sensible enough to realise that the main two powers in the region are Iran and Turkey. So we have a foot in both those camps. Iran protected us a great deal in the past. We have had considerable political benefit from our relationship with Turkey.²¹³

Other Arab officials voice wariness, partly due to the way Erdoğan's popularity and legitimacy show up their authoritarian regimes' unpopularity and legitimacy deficits. His Israel-bashing is a particular cause of concern for those who take a more moderate line.²¹⁴ There is some private uneasiness with the prime minister's populism compared to that of the more measured President Gül.²¹⁵ Mixing

religion and politics also raises suspicions. According to an Arab diplomat, Turkey only stresses its Islamic identity in the Persian Gulf "when it's convenient".²¹⁶

Some Middle Eastern partners have expressed discomfort at the "neo-Ottoman" rhetoric that has entered conversations.²¹⁷ Foreign Minister Davutoğlu denies reports that he has privately called AKP "the new Ottomans", yet in speeches he clearly sees Turkey as being "responsible" for much of the old Ottoman geography,²¹⁸ is happy to describe his goal as "Pax Ottomana"²¹⁹ and can talk about promoting religious freedom – while reading from an Ottoman imperial decree.²²⁰ Some Arab states object, privately but strongly.²²¹

Some Turkish officials state explicitly that Turkey's facilitation is more inspired by centralised Ottoman examples than EU multilateralism, hinting even at a desire to play a leading role:

[Turkey's] current mediation efforts, the peace-building rhetoric in the Middle East and elsewhere, always carries reference to the Ottoman Empire: Many high-level politicians and bureaucrats [nowadays] say when the Middle East and Balkans were Ottoman, there was peace and stability. The EU model is not really Turkey's model; in fact, many would see [the EU] to be

²¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official in the region, January 2010.

²¹² "We thought we should have zero-problem relations with Turkey, because the more we do that, the less it aligns with Israel". Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, February 2010.

²¹³ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official in the region, January 2010.

²¹⁴ "[Erdoğan] seemed to get drunk on the response to Gaza statements. As we say in Arabic, once you're up in the tree it's hard to get down. You have to keep up the anti-Israel rhetoric in order to get the same impact in public opinion. Eventually you'll make a mistake". Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official in the region, February 2010.

²¹⁵ "Middle East leaders talk to Erdoğan, but they do business with [Turkish President Abdullah] Gül". Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, December 2009. "They are uncomfortable with Erdoğan. He's a threat to them. He instigates their population. And the Iranian leadership is pragmatic but reserved towards AKP". Crisis Group interview, Gen. (ret.) Haldun Solmaztürk, 10 February 2010. However, as a second Arab diplomat put it, "when Erdoğan comes, the

attendance is huge. When Gül comes, it's nothing like that". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2010.

²¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February, 2010.

²¹⁷ "They don't say anything. But we feel it. Whether they succeed or not is something else". Crisis Group interview, Arab ambassador, Ankara, February 2010. "We are not talking about playing a [political] role. ... We have a history, a geography, a lot of cultural affinities. We can help them ... we have some foreign policy reflexes. We have an imperial history ... but we don't tell [our Middle East partners] about that". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, February 2010.

²¹⁸ "From Bosnia to Abkhazia, from Chechnya to Syria and Iraq, there are many peoples who have very great expectations of Turkey". Davutoğlu, Sarajevo, Anadolu Ajansı, 17 October 2009. "Turkey's geography and history has loaded Turkey with special responsibilities". Davutoğlu, CNN Türk, 25 November 2009.

²¹⁹ "We have no sovereignty over anyone. We want to contribute to the foundation of a lasting order in our region. If by Pax Ottomana you mean such an order ... it wouldn't be wrong." Davutoğlu, CNN Türk, 25 November 2009.

²²⁰ Davutoğlu, Alliance of Civilizations ministerial conference, Sarajevo, 14 December 2009.

²²¹ "They have the power, the history. They sometimes act as if they are running the countries. They forget themselves. If this influence is going to spread again, this is very dangerous to me as an Arab". Crisis Group interview, Saudi official, February 2010. "We hear they have Ottoman ambitions, or that they want to take this region under their umbrella. Who will let this happen? Nobody". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official in the region, January 2010.

too weak to deal with these kinds of conflicts. If you take Davutoğlu's recent efforts in the Balkans, surpassing and irritating the U.S. and the EU, you will have proof of what I say.²²²

Some within Arab governments also suspect that Turkey is active not so much to help the Middle East as in temporary reaction to the recent coldness from Europe, so as to make itself look important in the EU and the U.S.²²³ It is also seen as angled at Turkish domestic opinion, and hence insincere.²²⁴

More fundamentally, several Arab states are keenly interested in knowing where Turkey stands vis-à-vis Iranian nuclear and other ambitions, which some of them view as a greater concern than Israeli policies.

What's important for Arab leaders is the balance. They can tolerate Turkey appealing to the Arab street and anti-Israel populism as long as Turkey seems to be propping up the regional balance and keeping Iran in its corner.²²⁵

Nevertheless, one influential Turkish policymaker believes a fundamental shift is under way that will reshape the Middle East.

Arabs still have mixed feelings about the Turks. Varying degrees of intensity, love, respect, admiration, suspicion, mistrust and even dislike are part of the Arab perception of Turks today. ... But Turkey is back, not as a matter of ethnicity or religion, but as part of the new debate about geopolitics and world-system analyses. ... What we are seeing is not simply emotions or historical nostalgia but a different way of looking

at the world system. It is this aspect ... that will reshape Arab politics.²²⁶

B. DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS

While relations with the Middle East are clearly being developed by a broad range of Turkish actors, there are constraints on Turkish diplomacy. Ankara is working several fronts – including opening fifteen missions to serve the new business frontier in Africa – but its 1,000 career diplomats number about one quarter what is typical for major Western powers.²²⁷ Diplomats in Ankara say their Turkish counterparts often appear exhausted.

Foreign Minister Davutoğlu is widely viewed as a sincere idealist in his wish for Turkey to be a provider of stability and prosperity in the region. He has promoted respected officials in the foreign ministry and earned the esteem of Western diplomats.²²⁸ The idea that Turkey should aim to become a bigger and more respected player in the region also has broad domestic support. But this clarity of purpose may become clouded by domestic political priorities as his name is increasingly cited among those competing for possible future leadership posts.²²⁹ A Turkish strategist from the secularist camp remained sceptical:

The current government, living in a kind of dream world, has been trying to bite much more than they can really chew. It looks stupid that a country like Turkey, while having so many and crucial problems inside the country is wasting its energy, already limited political and managerial capacity, to solve all the problems in the wider region. It is like a contagious madness rapidly spreading in the ranks of AKP government. They lost sight of priorities – political rec-

²²² Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat in the Middle East, February 2010.

²²³ "Turkey is like Austria under [former Chancellor Bruno] Kreisky, running in when something happens. Turkey helps a bit. But I don't think it's a long-term thing". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, January 2010. "Erdoğan is more aggressive [than President Gül]. I don't think he feels that he'll get into Europe. But what he's doing puts some Arab leaders in a difficult position". Crisis Group interview, Saudi official in the region, February 2010. "They are eager to replace Egypt, but on what basis? Turkey wants to join the EU, we don't. We are part of the Arab League. If Turkey wants to play a role, it can, but it seems like it doesn't know what it wants. They've opened a Pandora's box". Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official, January 2010.

²²⁴ "They just want to appear that they are doing something". Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official in the region, January 2010.

²²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official, December 2010.

²²⁶ İbrahim Kalın, chief foreign policy adviser to the Turkish prime minister, *Today's Zaman*, 21 January 2010.

²²⁷ "The current government is a juggler. We have thrown a lot of balls in the air. Some are coming down, and how many hands do we have to catch them?" Crisis Group interview, Soli Özel, Istanbul, 1 March 2010.

²²⁸ "The difference is huge with Davutoğlu. The guy is hyperactive. He's a good manager, has the confidence of the foreign ministry. I've never seen anything like it. ... other foreign ministers in the region are fluff compared to him". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

²²⁹ "He's become a politician". Crisis Group interview, Hasan Kanbolat, director, Centre for Middle East Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Ankara, 10 February 2010. "He is turning into a politician and you can't gain [popularity] on the EU front". Crisis Group interview, Bülent Aras, Middle East expert, Ankara, 11 February 2010.

conciliation inside and relations with EU, Cyprus and Greece.²³⁰

AKP leaders have been tempted to win domestic support by using anti-Israeli populism²³¹ and nationalist stances.²³² Sometimes the government has used this support to break major taboos, including open displays of respect for ethnic differences and determination to impose civilian authority over the military. But this can cut both ways, especially as parliamentary elections approach in 2011, and may limit the government's room for manoeuvre on such important issues as Cyprus and Armenia. These govern the key relationships with the EU and U.S., and any compromise is unpopular. According to an Ankara newspaper chief, "Turkey is dynamic, but it can be a schizophrenic kind of dynamism. We have many crises outside but inside too. We should deal with both at the same time. Everything is linked".²³³

A real lack of information in Turkish society about the Middle East is another limiting factor. There is more interaction of civil society groups between Turkey and tiny Armenia than between Turkey and the Middle East, and there are few Turkish books on the modern Middle East.²³⁴ Even within AKP's rank and file some feel little support for giving up on Europe for a Middle East that is perceived as being backward and offering little to Turkey.²³⁵

²³⁰ Crisis Group email communication, Gen. (ret.) Haldun Solmaztürk, 21 January 2010.

²³¹ After Prime Minister Erdoğan's argument with Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos in January 2009, AKP organized a triumphal return for him the same night in Istanbul.

²³² When talks on normalisation with Armenia hit a bump over foreign legislatures' adoption of Armenian genocide resolutions, Erdoğan fanned the flames by threatening to send home the blameless thousands of migrant workers from Armenia whom the Turkish authorities had long deliberately allowed to work without permission. Interview with the BBC, 16 March 2010.

²³³ Crisis Group interview, Murat Yetkin, Ankara representative of Doğan Group, 3 March 2010.

²³⁴ "The Turkish and Middle Eastern peoples don't know each other, certainly not Turkish intellectuals, and that goes for Israel too". Crisis Group interview, Hasan Kanbolat, Director, Centre for Middle East Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Ankara, 10 February 2010.

²³⁵ "They asked us to cut off our beards for Europe, and we did. We then cut off our moustaches. I didn't just trim my hair, I cut off my sideburns too. Now they are trying to drive us into the swamps of the Middle East. They are going in the wrong direction. I can't accept that we did all these efforts for Europe for nothing". Crisis Group interview, AKP mayor, Antalya province, January 2010.

C. DISPUTES WITH ISRAEL

AKP leaders, most of whom were members of the former Welfare Party, have always been bitter about the way the Turkish military – highly influential in all important matters of the Turkish state in the 1990s – signed a military partnership with Israel during the Welfare Party's brief premiership in 1996.²³⁶ The Islamist fringe that represents some of AKP's constituency has also flirted with anti-Semitism, evidenced in ugly cartoons representing Jews and Israelis in Islamist newspapers.²³⁷

Prime Minister Erdoğan's own often-repeated opposition to Israeli policies towards Palestinians came to a head after Israel's December 2008 attack on Gaza.²³⁸ He first used a rare visit to Brussels in January 2009 to condemn Israel's actions, then, several days later at the World Economic Forum in Davos, strongly criticised President Shimon Peres on the matter and walked out of a panel meeting vowing never to return.²³⁹

In September, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu cancelled a trip to Israel when he was not allowed to visit Hamas officials in Gaza.²⁴⁰ The following month Turkey cancelled its hosting of a multinational air force exercise over Israeli involvement, causing U.S. and Italian participants to withdraw as well.²⁴¹ A week later, a Turkish

²³⁶ "AKP was always very uncomfortable with bilateral exercises with Israel." Crisis Group interview, Gen. (ret.) Haldun Solmaztürk. "There's a leftover of the agreements struck by the military [from 1996-1997]. The government didn't even know about them when they were signed.... All told, we have no strategic partnership". Crisis Group interview, Taha Özhan, director, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), Ankara, 12 March 2010.

²³⁷ For instance, Germany in 2005 banned the Turkish newspaper *Vakit* for anti-Semitism. For a representative survey see "Antisemitism in the Turkish Media (Part III): Targeting Turkey's Jewish Citizens", The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), 6 June 2005.

²³⁸ "In the city of Diyarbakır there was a huge demonstration, including shouts of 'Look! The Gazans are defending Istanbul!' This is the perception, which coincides with that of Erdoğan, so you have a synergy". Crisis Group interview, Taha Özhan, SETA, 12 March 2010.

²³⁹ "You have a very strong voice. I feel that you feel guilty, and that's why your voice was so loud. My voice is not going to be so loud because you know what I'm going to tell you. You know very well how to kill. I know very well how you killed and murdered children on the beaches. ... [Peres has] been talking for 23 minutes, and I only get twelve minutes. That can't be". Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, transcript of comments at World Economic Forum, Davos, 29 January 2009.

²⁴⁰ *Jerusalem Post*, 8 September 2009.

²⁴¹ "We translated the conscience of the people". Prime Minister Erdoğan, interview with Al Arabiya television, 14 October 2009.

state television show angered Israel by showing acted images of Israeli soldiers killing children in Gaza. Frictions arose over military projects, notably when a joint satellite project was cancelled after Israel put a condition that its own territory could not be photographed. There have been no new weapon deals.²⁴²

The new, hardline-dominated Israeli government, particularly Foreign Minister Lieberman, became even more antagonistic. When the nationalist Turkish television soap opera “Valley of the Wolves” showed fictional scenes of Israeli agents killing old people and kidnapping babies, Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon summoned the Turkish ambassador for a public dressing down.²⁴³ He privately told Israeli television cameramen to note how the Turk’s sofa was lower than his, that he was not smiling and that no Turkish flag had been put on the table. When this statement became public, Turkey threatened to withdraw its envoy in protest, and Israel apologised.

There is evidence that groups on both sides – notably the Labour Party in Israel and the old civilian-military policy establishment in Turkey – are trying hard to keep the relationship from deteriorating too far.²⁴⁴ Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak visited Turkey for several hours on 17 January 2010, followed in March by Israel’s chief of general staff, and Turkish officials have continued to head to Israel and to define the relationship as “strategic”.²⁴⁵ Some Israeli air training exercises continue in Turkish airspace. Even in these times of strain,

Israel still delivered the last part of its contract of refurbished M-60 tanks and the first six pilotless “Heron” drones used by Turkey to seek out PKK militants in northern Iraq.²⁴⁶ Delays in the Heron program were not due to politics but engineering problems, when Turkish-manufactured components turned out to be too heavy.²⁴⁷

The downturn in trade is not worse than general global trends. Israeli tourists visited Turkey in large numbers again in January and February 2010,²⁴⁸ and in March Turkey launched an advertising campaign to lure more back. Turkish Airlines’ four flights a day to Tel Aviv are still full and twice as frequent as routes to Dubai or Damascus.

However, Turkey perceives a diminished need for close ties to Israel, and some even see an element of confrontation in the relationship.²⁴⁹ Ankara now has excellent relations with Syria – hence no need of a military alliance with Israel against Damascus – and has built stronger links with Washington, making it feel less dependent until recently on pro-Israel lobby groups.²⁵⁰ It sees Israeli actions that keep the region on edge as hostile to its goals of stability and trade expansion.²⁵¹ In the future, Turkish policy will to a large extent be indexed to progress between Israel and the Palestinians and Israeli policy towards the holy sites in Jerusalem and Hebron.²⁵² Turkey will shift back towards the middle if and when Israel is perceived as re-engaging on peace talks,²⁵³ as Foreign

²⁴² “The weakening started earlier than the crisis in Gaza. We could provide some technology but not everything.... I don’t see new projects on the horizon, or transfers of technology. There is now a ‘hold’ on both sides”. Crisis Group interview, person with knowledge of Israeli policy in the region, February 2010.

²⁴³ Arguably, AKP has nothing to do with “Valley of the Wolves”. The series airs on a channel that is critical of the AKP government and presents the government as being weak or even in league with Israel with its “no-problem” policies. It thus reflects the thinking behind a best-selling series of right-wing Turkish books alleging that AKP leaders are actually part of an Israeli-Zionist conspiracy. Indeed, some have said that the series, which empties the streets of Syria when it airs in Arabic on Wednesday nights, reflects the policy of Damascus more than that of Ankara. See “Süriye kaçınıcı sezonda [Which season is Syria watching?]", *Newsweek Türkiye*, 17 January 2010.

²⁴⁴ “With Israel, there are limits to how much it can get worse, as well as how much it can get better”. Crisis Group interview, Bülent Aras, Middle East expert, Ankara, 11 February 2010.

²⁴⁵ “The strategic relationship is mainly about the military, energy and intelligence, not public emotions. As long as business is as usual on these fronts, relations are strategic”. Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat in the Middle East, February 2010.

²⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, Tel Aviv, March 2010.

²⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, person with knowledge of Israeli policy in the region, February 2010.

²⁴⁸ Compared to a year earlier, 34 per cent more Israelis arrived in January and eight per cent more in February, the first year-on-year monthly rise since December 2008. Figures from Turkish Embassy, Tel Aviv.

²⁴⁹ “It can be understood that as a ‘leader country’ in Middle East geopolitical terms Turkey has taken up position against Israel”. Cengiz Çandar, *Radikal*, 13 January 2010.

²⁵⁰ In the absence of past support from pro-Israel groups, Turkey failed in March 2010 to prevent passage of a resolution through the House Foreign Affairs Committee calling for U.S. recognition of an Armenian genocide.

²⁵¹ “The Israeli position that seeks instability for strategic advantage now conflicts with the Turkish need for stability to promote markets and economic growth”. Crisis Group interview, Soli Özel, Istanbul, 1 March 2010.²⁵¹

²⁵² “I don’t think [the Turkey-Israel relationship] will get better soon. Turkish policy is indexed to the Palestinians and Jerusalem. I can’t imagine Davutoğlu talking to [Israeli Foreign Minister] Lieberman”. Crisis Group interview, Bülent Aras, Middle East expert, Ankara, 11 February 2010.

²⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

Minister Davutoğlu and other leaders have said.²⁵⁴ Syria, which values Turkey's link to Israel, feels that Ankara has taken the right course until the Israeli government seeks to reactivate negotiations.²⁵⁵

Suspensions are not small on the Israeli side either.²⁵⁶ Israel is considering withholding export licences for the sale of defence items and services.²⁵⁷ It feels that it has not changed, while Turkey has.²⁵⁸ A leading Israeli analyst described the problem as an anti-Western, even an anti-Semitic slant in the AKP, not Israel's own actions.²⁵⁹

Some perceive Turkey's importance as rising compared to that of Israel in certain policy constituencies in Washington, thanks to the U.S. foreign policy interest in cooperating with Ankara over the future stability of Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East.²⁶⁰ The rare Israeli apology for insulting the Turkish ambassador in January was, however, interpreted by a leading Turkish Middle East commentator as a turning point in the

region.²⁶¹ Others believe Israel has many levers unavailable to Turkey.²⁶²

D. WESTERN ADMIRATION AND CONCERNS

Turkey's partners say that its Middle East activism has made it a player to watch.²⁶³ On balance, Western leaders have preferred to see the positive side of its Middle Eastern engagement, with the overlapping goals of security and free trade.²⁶⁴ The question about whether Turkey has made a fundamental change of direction is as often posed inside the country as outside. As one Western diplomat put it, "people like to classify Turkey. But you can't pin it down. It doesn't fit into a mould. And people find it very frustrating that things can't fit into a tidy basket".²⁶⁵

U.S. President George W. Bush's administration started mending fences in 2007, and Turkey sees itself as being even closer to the Obama administration's approach.²⁶⁶ President Obama chose Turkey as his first Muslim country to visit in April 2009, describing the two nations as being in a "model partnership",²⁶⁷ speaking of shared goals in the Middle East and not criticising his hosts'

²⁵⁴ "For Turkey-Israel relations to settle on a right axis, the Middle East peace process should be simultaneously revived on three legs; Israel-Syria, Israel-Palestine and Israel-Lebanon". Davutoğlu talking to Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak, *Today's Zaman*, 18 January 2010.

²⁵⁵ "With [Israeli Prime Minister] Netanyahu opposing the peace process, the Turkish position serves a purpose. In other circumstances, this kind of tension would play a negative role". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 1 February 2010.

²⁵⁶ After Turkey staged a small exercise on its border to Syria, Israel became "very suspicious of Turkey's military manoeuvres with Syria and thinks that Turkey is not going to support sanctions against Iran at the UN. It thinks that an ally of the past is going against its interests ... and in Washington, the Jewish lobby is very angry, and there is growing concern on the Hill". Crisis Group interview, Alexander Murinson, researcher on Turkey-Azerbaijan-Israel ties, Washington DC, October 2009.

²⁵⁷ Efraim Inbar, "Israeli-Turkish Tensions and Beyond", op. cit.

²⁵⁸ "Israel has been constant in its desire to maintain strong relations". Ibid.

²⁵⁹ "The Palestinian issue has gained greater resonance ... yet ... tensions with Israel largely reflect issues beyond the bilateral relations, rooted in the reorientation of Turkey's foreign policy. ... the current winter in the Ankara-Jerusalem relationship is also a result of a genuine dislike by the AKP leadership of Israel and Jews". Ibid.

²⁶⁰ "Turkey and Israel were partners post-Cold War, now they are competitors to be agents of U.S. influence". Crisis Group interview, Alexander Murinson, Washington DC, October 2009.

²⁶¹ "This is a perfect opportunity for understanding the new Turkey in the region and the new Middle East that is beginning to emerge". Cengiz Çandar, *Radikal*, 15 January 2010.

²⁶² "Turkey needs Israel more than Israel needs Turkey". Crisis Group interview, Steven Cook, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, November 2009.

²⁶³ "Turkey is the most important and under-appreciated relationship that the U.S. has". Crisis Group interview, Steven Cook, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, November 2009. "The Turkish engagement ensures mitigation of the US- and EU-supported Israeli influence and the Iranian search for power. The role of Turkey in the Middle East can no longer be ignored". Abdel Mottaleb El Hussein, German-Lebanese commentator, *Handelsblatt*, 22 January 2010.

²⁶⁴ "The balance is positive for the Americans and from where I sit as well". Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Ankara, January 2010. "The Turks do more good than bad. ... all in all, they're okay". Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, February 2010.

²⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, January 2010.

²⁶⁶ "There is a greater convergence of Turkish-U.S. strategy interests with the Obama administration. There is a greater convergence in substance and style, over Iraqi structures, cooperation with Iran, the Palestinian issue". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, February 2010.

²⁶⁷ "Turkey and the United States can build a model partnership in which a predominantly Christian nation, a predominantly Muslim nation – a Western nation and a nation that straddles two continents – can create a modern international community that is respectful, that is secure, that is prosperous". Barack Obama, press conference, Ankara, 6 April 2009. See www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/06/obama.turkey/index.html.

close relationship with Tehran.²⁶⁸ Nothing has officially shifted in Turkey's strategic identification with Western powers.²⁶⁹ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu get on well.²⁷⁰ A senior U.S. policy figure said:

I think there are imperial aspirations in Turkey for the first time in more than a century. This is a vacuum into which Turkey has moved; we've encouraged [Turkey and] others to get on the playing field, and they're becoming increasingly confident ... There is a large list of issues in which we need Turkish acquiescence or cooperation. No other country in the world has a list that long.²⁷¹

Indeed, when Obama met President Gül in April 2009, the two listed their mutual areas of concern and found eight or nine that a senior Turkish official called "full coincidence of interest", mostly in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Caucasus. The official believed there were no fundamental differences, even on Syria and Iran.²⁷² So far Washington has given Turkey the benefit of the doubt that much of the time it is acting in support of mutual interests in the region,²⁷³ especially in Afghanistan, Iraq and the "lofty and admirable goal" of its zero-problem foreign policy.²⁷⁴

Other influential Americans remain to be convinced, and a senior official has highlighted complaints about Tur-

key's policies towards Iran and Israel.²⁷⁵ AKP's use of anti-Israel rhetoric and its exaggeration of its foreign policy successes raise suspicions of insincerity and unreliability. Relations could also nosedive if Turkey is prominent in blocking UN sanctions on Iran. Furthermore, some Americans doubt how much Turkey can fix U.S. problems in the Middle East.

People go around town, saying, "do things through Turkey", but they're not always persuasive. The U.S. prefers dealing with Middle East states bilaterally, and the Mideast states prefer that too. I'm also not sure that the Turks have fully worked out their Mideast strategy. I don't see that Turkey and the Middle East necessarily and neatly overlap.²⁷⁶

While some in Turkey overstate Ankara's ability to challenge Washington,²⁷⁷ Americans do sense a diminution of their former influence.²⁷⁸ So far, officials have kept differences muted, but they may not stay in the background if a real conflict of interest emerges.²⁷⁹ Criticism has been voiced by American²⁸⁰ and Israeli commentators who portray Turkey's problems with Israel as proof

²⁶⁸ "We share the goal of a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbours ... Like the United States, Turkey has been a friend and partner in Israel's quest for security. And like the United States, you seek a future of opportunity and statehood for the Palestinians ... We must pursue every opportunity for progress, as you've done by supporting negotiations between Syria and Israel. ... Turkey and the United States support a secure and united Iraq". Barack Obama, speech to Turkish parliament, 6 April 2009.

²⁶⁹ "Relations with the U.S. are as good as ever". Prof. Soli Özel, Propeller Club speech, op. cit.

²⁷⁰ "Whenever Davutoğlu goes to Iran, he calls his British and U.S. counterpart. The theory is not to create tension between regional moves and international moves". Crisis Group interview, Bülent Aras, Middle East expert, 11 February 2010.

²⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, former U.S. diplomat Charles Freeman, Washington DC, November 2009.

²⁷² Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Washington DC, November 2009.

²⁷³ "The U.S. has solid interests in what they are doing in Iraq. Turkey has a formidable influence on making an Iraq pullout successful. The Turks are facilitating the elections. The Americans are really engaging the Turks and value them". Crisis Group interview, EU official, Ankara, February 2010.

²⁷⁴ Philip Gordon, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Sabanci Lecture, Washington DC, 17 March 2010.

²⁷⁵ "Let us be frank: the dynamism we see in Turkey has raised questions in the minds of some observers about where Turkey is heading. ... the questions all eventually boil down to a single concern: is Turkey turning away from the West? We do not see it that way. [But on Iran] Turkey has at times sounded a different note.... Nor should improved relations with Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbours come at the expense of its historic allies such as Israel". Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Jon Alterman, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 November 2009.

²⁷⁷ "The main reason why the U.S. cannot attack Iran and Syria is Ankara's 'strong position', which has got rid of Washington's oppression and control". *Yeni Şafak*, 16 February 2010.

²⁷⁸ "Syria is a huge policy departure. In the past, things were always on our terms. Now Turkey is independent". Crisis Group interview, former U.S. diplomat active in U.S.-Turkish trade, Washington DC, October 2009. A Turkish diplomat in the Middle East said AKP had truly diversified the weight of Turkey's relationships. "Before, the key was always the EU. The EU is still an important key, but much more attention is diverted to the East, to Russia and the Balkans. ... although we are still in line with the U.S., we are nonetheless much more independent". Crisis Group interview, February 2010.

²⁷⁹ "They're not talking in a loud voice about our problem. They see danger in provoking Turkey, though no doubt they are unhappy about the state of relations with Israel. But to put the blame on the Turkish side alone would be short-sighted". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Washington DC, November 2009.

²⁸⁰ "The central question is no longer whether Turkey should be integrated into Europe's economic and political structure, but rather whether Turkey should remain a part of the Western defence structure. ... the West is losing Turkey". David Schenker, "A NATO without Turkey", *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 November 2009.

of a general turn away from the West.²⁸¹ This fuels perceptions of an anti-West radicals vs. pro-West moderates view of the Middle East.²⁸² Nevertheless, Turkish officials point out that the U.S. has moved from censuring Turkey's engagement with Syria to greater engagement itself.²⁸³

Strains in the U.S.-Turkey relationship do not just derive from Prime Minister Erdoğan's anti-Israel rhetoric and his indulgence of Iran and other states in dispute with the U.S. (see above).²⁸⁴ After Turkey first gave the U.S. the impression of sincerity in wishing to settle its outstanding problems with Armenia – aside from the Iraq invasion, the single biggest state-to-state problem between the two countries – Ankara backtracked, and a U.S. policy expert said its “bobbing, weaving and making excuses made people angry”.²⁸⁵ A new round of frictions in March over U.S. Congressional moves to recognise the 1915 Ottoman-era massacres of Armenians as genocide led to the withdrawal of the Turkish ambassador from Washington.

Turkey needs to manage these perceptions better.²⁸⁶ Comparing itself to Janus may be meant to describe the god who faced two ways, but some may take it less flatteringly to mean “two-faced”.²⁸⁷ A former top U.S. diplomat put it: “It's going to be harder for them in Washington from now on. Erdoğan is losing credibility. Three or four years ago, if you asked ten people, ‘are you disturbed by Turkey's direction’, five or six would say yes. Now it's seven or eight people”.²⁸⁸

Some Turkish leaders and commentators have fed Western concerns by talking of Middle Eastern activism as an alternative and not a complement to the hard work of EU accession.²⁸⁹ Turkey's identification with EU policy statements on Iran has declined.²⁹⁰ Some in Europe say Turkey might be competing with the EU.²⁹¹ One sympathetic EU official said he saw “problems with image, and substance. There is a religious twist ... politics can pollute a well-established geopolitical scheme”.²⁹² For sure, Turkey's activism is affecting EU policy implementation. For instance, Turkey's new support contributed to making Syria feel empowered to snub an EU Association Agreement in October 2009.²⁹³

²⁸¹ “The differences between Jerusalem and Ankara have gradually increased, dovetailing Turkey's growing divergence with the West”. Efraim Inbar, “Israeli-Turkish Tensions and Beyond”, op. cit.

²⁸² “The perceived shift in Turkish foreign policy worries many Europeans and Americans for two reasons. First, Turkey's growing ties with regimes shunned by the West – those of Syria, Iran and Sudan, as well as Hamas – could undermine Western foreign policy objectives.... Second, some observers suspect that Turkey's stronger [eastern] ties ... are the outward manifestation of worrisome trends within Turkey ... [the Kemalists seeing] a creeping Islamisation of Turkish politics and society, while more liberal types detect a roll-back of democratic freedoms and civil rights”. Katinka Barysch, “Can Turkey combine EU accession and regional leadership?”, Centre for European Reform, January 2010.

²⁸³ “Everybody was criticising me in 2006 over Syria. The American side did not appreciate it for a long, long time. They said it was challenging them, sabotaging them. Now they understand better, and we're not under pressure any more. Now they understand the benefits of Turkish policy”. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Washington DC, November 2009.

²⁸⁴ “There's a triumphalism in Turkish foreign policy and a sense in Washington that people should try to keep the Turks in their lane”. Crisis Group interview, Steven Cook, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, November 2009.

²⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, former U.S. envoy to Turkey, Istanbul, March 2010.

²⁸⁶ “We've gone back to days when there are question marks, which aren't true and we know it. We have to make sure others don't get the wrong impression. Many of these things have been done by Europe. If we do it, why should we be accused of ‘turning to face the east’? We hope others turn to face us, to be a point of attraction”. Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Washington DC, November 2009.

²⁸⁷ “Turkey today is a Janus-like geography that offers gates and doorways to the East and West”. Suat Kınıklıoğlu, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 3 December 2010.

²⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, October 2010.

²⁸⁹ “Okay, you ask ‘if our openings to the Middle East go a long way, what will happen if our obligations to ‘third countries’ conflict with the EU acquis?’ Don't worry, when that day comes, the EU will have to restructure itself for Turkey”. Hakan Albayrak, “Turkey's Middle East opening and the EU”, *Yeni Şafak*, 27 January 2010.

²⁹⁰ Whereas Turkey used to associate itself with 90-95 per cent of EU Common Foreign and Security Policy statements on Sudan, Iran, Syria and other difficult African and Arab-related issues, this fell back to about 80 per cent in 2009. “So far we don't make much of a fuss of it”. Crisis Group interview, EU official, Ankara, February 2009.

²⁹¹ Noting Turkey's upstaging of France in relations with Syria, Turkish commentator Soli Özel said Turkey is “doing what the EU always wanted to do, but couldn't do”. Propeller Club speech, op. cit.

²⁹² Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2010.

²⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, January 2010. The EU and in particular France had long delayed the agreement too, apparently to punish Syria for alleged involvement in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister al-Hariri.

Nevertheless, many EU and U.S. officials give Turkey the benefit of the doubt,²⁹⁴ even while stressing the need to keep its EU reforms and convergence on track.²⁹⁵ The whole world is, after all, shifting policy to take into account new, emerging powers.²⁹⁶ In many ways, the economic dynamic behind Turkey's activism mirrors the Europeans' own close commercial engagement with the region.²⁹⁷ The European Commission's 2009 progress report called Turkey's Arab-Israeli engagement "constructive". Echoing many EU leaders' praise, Spain's foreign minister cited Turkey's Middle East activism as a reason why it is a useful member of the European family.²⁹⁸ Referring to the new policy, Germany judged that "Turkey is not only an anchor of stability in its neighbourhood, but also an exporter of stability".²⁹⁹

For the same reasons, some believe the EU should do much more to enhance strategic cooperation with Turkey. Sweden's foreign minister, Carl Bildt, said that Turkey's statements in defence of Sudan's policy in Darfur went too far, but listed its Iraq policy as "very positive", noting that the EU was following Turkey in trying to improve ties with Damascus and that Turkish leaders had access in Tehran that few others did.

Turkey's foreign policy is essentially an added value for Europe and for Turkey's EU aspirations. ... [it] is to a large extent like ours, but it is not identical ... [and] for some it has been difficult to digest the change of Turkey from a passive partner to the far more active role Turkey is playing now.³⁰⁰

Another open question in U.S. and European minds is whether Middle East activism means that Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu have lost interest in Turkey's EU process.³⁰¹ Even at home, there are those who believe that Davutoğlu sees EU convergence as just one subject among many.³⁰² In explaining its "recent increase in initiatives", Davutoğlu stressed that "Turkey is not reorienting its foreign policy". He noted that 47 of his 93 overseas visits in 2009 were to European capitals and felt obliged to underline more than fifteen times in a six-page article that full EU integration remains Turkey's chief priority.³⁰³

We share the same history. We share the same geography. We share the same vision. We share the same values: democracy, human rights, rule of law. Turkey and the EU row in the same boat, through tough waters at times but surely towards the same direction of global peace and stability.³⁰⁴

²⁹⁴"Turkey has a different view of the Middle East, a different view of the neighbourhood. We have to understand this and respect this. They are convinced that they are not undermining the Western approach, they are just trying to shape policy. And when it comes to sanctions, that's a tough thing even within the EU". Crisis Group interview, EU official, Ankara, February 2010.

²⁹⁵"Turkey's EU aspirations and its re-emergence as a regional power are not necessarily incompatible. But Turkey needs to maintain its strong Westward orientation and continue its internal modernisation in order to become a strong and respected regional player". Katinka Barysch, "Can Turkey combine EU accession and regional leadership?", op. cit.

²⁹⁶"It's not just Turkey. We are all turning East now". Crisis Group interview, Judith Kipper, Middle East analyst, Washington DC, November 2009.

²⁹⁷"Europeans have no reason to object. They are dealing with the Middle East more than Turkey. You should see some of the things European states get up to in our region". Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Ankara, February 2010.

²⁹⁸"Turkey is part of the European family of peoples. It's better to have it inside the EU than to leave it standing before the door. Turkish diplomacy is very well connected in the Middle East and Central Asia, where it is taking on an important mediating role. Turkey is also an important partner in the dialogue of civilisations between East and West. ... the Islamic-conservative regime in Turkey shows that it is possible to protect individual freedoms, a state of law and human rights". Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos, quoted in *Die Welt*, 23 January 2010.

²⁹⁹Speech by German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, Ankara, 7 January 2010.

³⁰⁰Interview with Carl Bildt, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, fall 2009.

³⁰¹Citing confusion in EU policymaking after the approval of the Lisbon Treaty, Prime Minister Erdoğan openly questioned the utility of the EU for Turkey in a March meeting with an EU leader. Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, March 2010.

³⁰²"Davutoğlu is not very interested or concerned by the EU process". Crisis Group interview, Hasan Kanbolat, Director, Centre for Middle East Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Ankara, 10 February 2010.

³⁰³Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the EU in 2010", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Fall 2009.

³⁰⁴Ibid.

V. CONCLUSION

Turkey's new engagement with the Middle East and the charismatic appeal of its leaders among Middle Eastern peoples have made the country a player that the region and the world need to take into account. The U.S. and EU, Turkey's two main traditional partners, are on the whole supportive of this new activism and see it as an asset. Turkey has achieved a notable economic expansion and has provided a living example to Middle Eastern societies of useful new ways to mix progress, tradition and democratisation.

Ankara's facilitation in regional disputes has had a mostly positive impact. Most notable were the 2008 Turkish-hosted proximity talks between Israel and Syria. Turkey can claim a minor supporting role in helping to end the Israeli-Hamas war in Gaza in 2009, as well as in trying new ways to avoid a clash with Iran over suspicions that it wants to build a nuclear weapon.

Turkey has not been uniformly successful, however. Populist and Islamist rhetoric from the prime minister and a perception of his personal sympathy for anti-Western regimes have at times undermined Turkey's ability to present itself as a neutral actor on intra-Arab or Iranian-Arab axes. It is now less able to play a facilitation role between Israel and its regional adversaries, without prejudice as to whether the blame lies with Israeli actions in Gaza, the new hardline Israeli government or Turkey's own hardening approach to the Jewish state.

In the broader Middle East, Arab governments, knowing their own collective weakness, at first welcomed Turkey as a counterweight to Iran and Israel. But some became uncomfortable as the Turkish prime minister appeared to be upstaging their own regimes with his anti-Israel rhetoric, as fears rose that Turkey might have neo-Ottoman regional ambitions and as they saw Turkish leaders use Middle East activism as a lever to raise their country's profile with Western partners, expand trade or drum up support in domestic politics.

Turkey remains a secondary player in the Middle East. In key disputes where it is a primary player – with neighbouring Armenia and the Republic of Cyprus – AKP leaders have stumbled and not always shown the internal coherence and commitment needed to find solutions. Ultimately, breakthroughs in the Armenian and Cyprus questions would do more to help Turkey's future than the incremental progress visible in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, Turkey's activism and soft power in the region have been building for more than a decade and are still on a broad upswing. The new generation of businessmen, diplomats and television stars are all making connections in the region that will prove deep and enduring. This is particularly the case in Syria and Iraq, especially Iraqi Kurdistan. Indeed, in an echo of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's argument about geographic and historic strategic depth, these are the places in the Middle East where the old Ottoman Empire was strongest.

The Turkish promise of taking the example of the early EU to the Middle East by integrating regional infrastructure and economies remains a work in progress. Work on building such bridges has certainly begun in earnest, and the indisputable new pull of the hub of Istanbul shows how important Turkey is becoming to the region.

As long as Turkey does not let its new self-confidence give way to over-confidence, does not mistake regional acquiescence for powerlessness or forget that it is success in the West that makes it attractive to the East as well as vice versa, the country's influence and ability to improve regional peace and security will grow. And just as the commercial integration and political convergence with the EU has proved such a valuable locomotive in the cause of Turkish reform, Turkey's success in Middle Eastern markets and societies is proving to be a positive dynamic. In short, Turkey is not breaking away from the West, as some have suggested. It is rather a more modernised and internationalised Turkey that now feels strong and secure enough to take up new Middle East challenges.

Istanbul/Brussels, 7 April 2010

APPENDIX A

MAP OF THE MIDDLE EAST REGION



Map No. 4102 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
August 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section