

Turkey's "Zero Problem"

Foreign Policy:

An Untenable Balancing Act

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THE EAST AND THE WEST, the old and the new, the religious and the secular, all meet in Turkey. It is a land of contradictions, and its foreign policy is no exception. Although Turkey has deep military and political alliances with the United States and Israel, it maintains good relations with their enemies as well, Iran and Syria. Turkey's so-called "zero problem" foreign policy aims to maintain the best possible relationships with all of its neighbors and regional and international actors. This policy is in line with the cautious foreign policy of Kemalism and is a response to the volatility of regional politics and the realities of the international system after the Cold War. Turkish foreign policy experts distinguish between Turkey's friends and neighbors. The United States and Israel are viewed as friends because their relationship rests on both strategic and ideological convergence. They agree on the general values of liberalism, modernity, and secularism in the public sphere. Turkey believes in advocating these ideas in the Middle East through diplomatic and economic measures, but at times has been at odds with what it perceives as an approach overly reliant on hard power to promote these values. Theocratic, illiberal Iran and dictatorial Syria are referred to as neighbors rather than friends, because while they may converge on some strategic interests, they oppose the values on which the Turkish state was founded.

Since the 1953 Truman Doctrine, the United States and Turkey have found their relationship to be mutually beneficial. For the United States, Turkey served as a bulwark against the Soviet threat during the Cold War and, with few exceptions, helped maintain the regional status quo. Even after the Cold War, the US still has a strong interest in keeping Turkey in the "Western Club" and in using Turkey for US diplomatic and military freedom of action. Turkey, on the other hand, looks at its friendship with the United States as a balance to Russia, which Turkey continues to view as an "expansionist"

threat. Turkey also believes that only with the backing of the United States can it ever hope to manage the instability of the Middle East and the Balkans. Since 1953, the United States has been Turkey's leading supplier of military defense weapons. Turkey also uses American clout to advance other interests, such as securing Caspian oil supplies and integrating into the European Union.¹ The tight strategic partnership between the United States and Turkey is therefore mainly driven by military and political interests, although economic concerns also play a role.

The relationship between the United States and Turkey has experienced turbulence since the US intervention in Iraq. When the United States intervened in Iraq in 2003, Turkey did not allow the US to use its eastern border as a northern front into Iraq and did not join the "Coalition of the Willing." Turkey's decision was based on security, political, and economic factors.² Sabri Sayarı, a renowned expert on Turkish and US foreign policy, called Turkey's decision not to join the United States the "biggest blunder" in the history of Turkish foreign policy.³ The point, though overstated, is not far from the truth. Turkey did not manage to convince the US to reconsider its unilateral approach and failed to safeguard its own interests in the Kurdish dominated region of northern Iraq. Turkish-American relations have since improved, but are still tainted by the experience in Iraq.

Turkey has also experienced ebbs and flows in its relations with Israel. In 1949, Turkey became the first country with a Muslim majority to recognize the state of Israel. However, relations between the countries deteriorated as a result of the Six-Day War in 1967. Public sympathy towards the Palestinian cause further estranged relations. Since the 1990s, this trend has reversed. At the time of the Oslo peace process, public opinion towards Israel improved considerably. This trend allowed for the signing of historic and highly publicized Turkish-Israeli cooperation agreements in 1996. The treaties accomplished considerable political, economic, and strategic objectives, including information sharing and joint military training, a free trade agreement, and defense contracts. The agreements were initially intended to "offset the possible negative consequences" of growing military ties between Syria and Greece, two countries with which Turkey has historically had hostile relations.⁴

Three developments in the last five years have challenged the relationship further. First, Turkey's military, historically the strongest supporter of relations with Israel, has found itself weakened as a result of the reforms Turkey has undertaken to meet the criteria for EU accession. Second, the 2002 election of the moderate Islamic party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has further strained relations. The AKP's reconciliation with Syria

and Iran and open denunciation of Israel's policy in the occupied territories have not played well in Israel. Finally, developments in the regional arena have also had important effects on Israeli-Turkish relations. According to Seymour Hersh's 2004 article in the *New Yorker*, Israel's response to American strategic failure in Iraq was to aid Kurdish-Iraqi efforts for independence with the goal of establishing a strategic enclave friendly to Israeli interests.⁵ The Turks see Israel's relationship with the Kurds as a betrayal of their friendship, since an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Iraq will inevitably lead to agitation among Turkish Kurds.

Turkey's relations with Iran are influenced by both economic and political interests. Simply put, Turkey shares "converging economic interests with Iran, as well as diverging political interests, the intersection of which provides the sources of Turkey's dilemma."⁶ Iran, a neighbor and a resource-rich country, provides Turkey with oil and natural gas. In August of 1996, as Turkey's military was improving relations with Israel, Turkey's first Islamist government, led by the Welfare Party, signed a contract nearing \$30 billion to buy natural gas from Iran. The treaty came only a week after the United States, Turkey's NATO partner, began accelerating the imposition of sanctions on Iran and Libya. The treaty was widely seen as a "slap in the face" to the United States.⁷ Ideology plays an important role in Iranian-Turkish relations. Despite the religious principles of the AKP, Turkey, a secular and democratic country, sees the revolutionary theocratic state as anathema to its state ideology. Furthermore, during the Iran-Iraq war, Turkey accused Iran of supporting Kurdish separatists in northern Iraq in order to weaken Saddam

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Hussein's hold on the country. The resulting Kurdish autonomy in the north of Iraq and the threat it poses to Turkey's territorial integrity and domestic stability has led to tensions with Iran. Such anxieties have slowly eroded, however, as Iran increasingly focuses on internal realities, as opposed to exporting Islam. In the words of *Daily Star* reporter Murat Somer,

Turkey and Iran can cooperate, "as long as the respective regimes in both countries are secure and stable."⁸

Under the current AKP government, relations between Turkey and Iran have arguably improved, even in light of international criticism of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's leadership in Tehran. In July of 2004, Turkish

Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan, in a landmark visit to Tehran, highlighted his desire for closer relations between Iran and Turkey and hoped for a doubling of bilateral trade volume.⁹ Ironically, the Kurdish issue is currently playing a role in the improvement of Turkish-Iranian relations. Turkey and Iran have held important diplomatic talks to voice shared concerns over the future of the region, specifically the future of Kurdish nationalism.¹⁰ Reaffirming their new relationship, Turkey merely disapproved of President Ahmadinejad's comments that Israel should be "wiped off the map,"¹¹ while the United Nations Security Council roundly condemned his anti-Israeli remarks.¹²

Until the late 1990s, Turkey and Syria did not maintain friendly diplomatic relations. The main point of the tension between them was Syrian support for PKK terrorism in Turkey. Other conflicts included water disputes over the Euphrates River and competing territorial claims in Hatay. Relations have improved since 1998, when Syria responded to a Turkish ultimatum by expelling Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK, and renouncing support of the Kurdish separatists. This was followed by compromises on other outstanding issues. True to Turkey's balancing act policies, Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer invited Syrian President Al-Assad to Turkey only a month after President Bush and Congress approved sanctions against Syria. Assad's visit in January of 2004 was the first by a Syrian leader in 17 years.¹³ To reciprocate this momentous occasion, President Sezer was invited to visit Damascus in April of 2005. He accepted the invitation in spite of US Ambassador Eric Edelman's objections. A "new age" of Turkish-Syrian cooperation had seemingly begun.¹⁴

A DELICATE BALANCE: PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE OR STRATEGIC COOPERATION?

Turkish foreign policy experts explain Turkey's delicate balance as being based on foreign policy principles of "peaceful coexistence" and "non-intervention."¹⁵ As former Turkish Ambassador Umut Arik says, "Turkey is trying to create a balance, an equilibrium. We seek to explain friends to neighbors and neighbors to friends. We are trying to mediate."¹⁶ Former Ambassador Mustafa Aşula agrees, "We do not wish to see harm done to our neighbors and do not want neighbors to harm friends."¹⁷ Overall, Ambassador Murat Bilhan, chairman of the Center for Strategic Research in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, states, "Turkey is trying to balance goodwill."¹⁸

Turkey's desire to maintain good relations with its friends and neighbors is not a policy driven by altruistic intentions. The Kemalist principle of "Peace

at Home, Peace in the World” is not an ideology rooted in a call for peace and justice. It was born out of Atatürk’s pragmatic realization that Turkey, torn by its War of Independence in the early 1920s, was in need of internal cohesion to stand up to external threats. Any ambitions to resurrect the Ottoman Empire would have inhibited this effort. Today, Turkey does not want to offend friends or neighbors because it does not want its interests jeopardized. In other words, Turkey strives towards diplomacy with its neighbors not because it inherently objects to war, but because any intervention or attack in the region may lead to instability on Turkey’s borders or incite Kurdish sentiments within the country. Given Turkey’s power in this volatile region, such diplomacy is seen as a necessity. As Lenore Martin writes in *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy*:

Middle East international politics encourages Turkey to balance its interests in countering threats to its national security emanating from the region with maintaining good economic and diplomatic relations with its neighbors, some of who consider the United States and Israel to be adverse to their own interests.¹⁹

In trying to please both neighbors and friends, however, Turkey may find itself estranged from both. Janice Weiner, a political officer in the US Embassy in Ankara, is critical of Turkey’s efforts, “While we understand the importance of Turkey having stable relations with neighbors, we strongly differ on the means.”²⁰ As an example, Weiner refers to the improvement of relations between Turkish and Iranian officials, which she sees as the “legitimization” of an irresponsible Iranian regime. The concern of the United States government increased in 2004 and 2005 at the time of the aforementioned landmark visits with Iran and Syria.

As tensions grow between the West and the Middle East, it is becoming more and more difficult for Turkey to continue its precarious balancing act. Tensions between the United States and Israel and Iran and Syria, are mounting. The leadership in Tehran is seemingly bent on attaining nuclear weapons and has recently issued statements calling for the destruction of Israel. Meanwhile, Damascus has been implicated in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. In the last two years, the United States has issued perhaps the strongest historic condemnations of Iran and Syria. Some prominent analysts have argued that the likelihood of a US American war against one of these states is increasing.²¹ Entities, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the EU, which argue for the use of diplomacy in dealing with Iran, have also begun taking a more

hard-line stance. In late September 2005, the EU issued a draft resolution, cleared by the IAEA, to refer Iran to the UN Security Council. In such an environment, Turkey's "zero problem" approach is showing its limitations.

THE LIMITS OF TURKEY'S REALISM: PREDICTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Turkey faces notable benefits and costs to committing itself to this balancing approach regardless of developments in the international arena. It ought to weigh these in relation to an alternative policy, one that would take sides between its neighbors and friends and their irreconcilable interests. The benefits of continuing the current policy are limited and are ultimately outweighed by the costs. Such benefits are essentially limited to economic interests. Both Iran and Syria trade extensively with Turkey and are an important source of Turkey's energy supply. However, these benefits may soon be outweighed by the political, military, and strategic costs that would be incurred by continuing this policy. Turkey's power, while significant regionally, is relatively restricted on the global scale. Its penchant for diplomacy is understandable on realist grounds. But diplomacy with everyone has its perils. As the prospects of a showdown between the United States and Israel and Iran and Syria, slowly increases, Turkey's allegiance will inevitably be put to the test. In all likelihood, Turkey will ultimately support its friends because of their greater strategic importance and political power.

Turkey though, will undoubtedly be reluctant to break from its Kemalist approach to foreign policy. As important as Turkey is to the United States and Israel, Washington is unlikely to continue to tolerate Ankara's open relationship with Tehran and Damascus. As was the case in Iraq, if Turkey chooses to sit on the sideline, it may be excluded from helping to determine the future of the region and will face another crisis in relations with its friends. Unlike the intervention in Iraq, however, international criticism of Tehran is much more united, as the EU's and the IAEA's support of Iran's referral to the UN Security Council illustrate. In the event of war with Iran, not only will halfhearted, last-minute support of action anger the United States and Israel, but it also might isolate Turkey internationally.

A feasible alternative to the Turkish policy of "zero problem" is for

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Turkey to increasingly realign with its friends while moving away from its neighbors, especially Iran. The leadership in Tehran is becoming increasingly radical, raising concerns in the United States, Israel, and the international community. Rather than continuing its relations with Tehran, Ankara can follow the United States' lead as it takes a tougher stance towards Iran. The long-term benefits will outweigh the short term costs of pursuing such a policy, which are limited to economic interests and risk aversion. Siding with the United States and Israel when it comes to dealing with Iran will dramatically improve Turkey's relations with both. Relations with these two friends are extremely important for Turkey and are in need of repair. Iran will remain Turkey's neighbor and, consequently, a trading partner, but only to the extent that it accepts the regulations of the United States and the international community. Turkey should apply the same type of policy towards Syria, especially if the international community puts the same pressures on Damascus as are currently being applied to Tehran.

So far, Turkey's balancing act has worked. It has provided Turkey with political, military, and economic benefits. But tensions between Turkey's friends and neighbors are slowly mounting. Continuance of a balancing act after one side calls for Turkey's allegiance, however, will lessen Turkey's influence in the region, regardless of whether the US and Israel, or Syria and Iran, ultimately win the most influence in the Middle East. If Turkey continues to be friends with everyone until the eleventh hour, it may very well find itself alone at the end of the day.

¹ Martin, Lenore G; Dimitris Keridis. 2002. *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy*. Cambridge. The MIT Press. p 83-99.

² Aydın, Mustafa; Damla Aras. 2005. Political conditionality of economic relations between paternalist states: Turkey's interaction with Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Arab Studies Quarterly (ASQ), Winter-Spring. www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2501/is_1_2_27/ai_n15694704/print

³ Interview with Sabri Sayarı. December 29, 2005.

⁴ Sayarı, 49.

⁵ Hersh, Seymour. 2004. Plan B. *The New Yorker*. June 28.

⁶ Martin, Lenore. *Turkey's Middle East Foreign Policy. The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy*. p172

⁷ Turkey-Iran Deal: A Slap in the Face to US. Federation of American Scientists. August 16, 1996. <http://www.fas.org/news/iran/1996/960816-452798.htm>; accessed January 26, 2006

⁸ Somer, Murat. 2005. In Iran and Iraq, Turkey faces its own duality. *The Daily Star*. August 22. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=17830; accessed January 14, 2006.

⁹ Singh, K. Gajendra. 2004. Turkey and Iran Moving Closer. South Asia Analysis Group. March 3. <http://www.saag.org/papers11/paper1077.html>; accessed January 28, 2006.

¹⁰ Martin, 176.

¹¹ Turkey frowns on Iran's anti-Israel remark. *The Daily Star* (originally published in Agence France Presse) http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=2&article_id=19674; accessed February 24, 2006.

¹² Security Council condemns anti-Israel words. CNN. Saturday, October 29, 2005 http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/10/28/iran.un.reaction/?section=cnn_world; accessed February 24, 2006.

¹³ Historic Turkey visit for Syrian leader. *Aljazeera.net*. January 5, 2004. <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8EF19C19-689F-47B7-A900-DDE9DAD87604.htm>; accessed January 23, 2006.

¹⁴ Singh, K Gajendra. 2005. A new age for Turkey-Syria relations. *Asia Times*. April 14. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GD14Ak01.html; accessed January 23.

¹⁵ For example, interview with Amb. Murat Bilhan, January 3, 2006; interview with Farai Tinc, January 2, 2006.

¹⁶ Interview with Ambassador Umut Arık. January 3, 2006.

¹⁷ Interview with Ambassador Mustafa Aşula. January 3, 2006.

¹⁸ Interview with Ambassador Murat Bilhan. January 3, 2006.

¹⁹ Martin, 189.

²⁰ Interview with Janice Weiner. January 4, 2006.

²¹ For example, Hersh states that in interviews with senior intelligence officers, “I was repeatedly told that the next strategic target was Iran.” in Hersh, Seymour. 2005. *The Coming Wars: What the Pentagon Can Now Do in Secret*. The New Yorker. January 24.