

Analysis

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Summary: Across its neighborhood and in policy areas as diverse as security, trade, energy, and migration, Turkish foreign policy has fundamentally transformed. In some cases, such as Turkish policies in Eastern Europe or in the fields of trade and migration, the change since the end of the Cold War has been incremental. In other areas, such as in the Middle East and in the realm of security policy, the shift has been more abrupt and visible. But the transformation of Turkey's neighborhood policies is undeniable. This article briefly recounts the major transformations in Turkey's neighborhood policies over the last decade, to Turkey's north and south. It highlights the principal achievements as well as the pending challenges and flashpoints. The purpose of this account is to assess European perceptions of and reactions to Turkey's neighborhood policies, with an eye to drawing out the implications for Turkey's tortured accession path to the European Union.

Turkey's Neighborhood Policy: A European Perspective

By Nathalie Tocci

Turkey's Neighborhood Policies: Successes, Pending Challenges, and Flashpoints

The transformation in Turkey's foreign policy can be read as a mix of external geopolitical as well as internal political, economic, and societal changes. Externally, the end of the Cold War, the ensuing 1990-91 Gulf War, and, more recently, the 2003 war in Iraq induced Turkey to engage more actively in its neighborhood, both to the north and south. Yet changes in Turkey's domestic set-up fundamentally altered the nature and style of that involvement. Internally, Turkish foreign policy is no longer the exclusive domain of the military and the ministry of foreign affairs. Not only have these two actors changed, but others have acquired a growing role in foreign policy-making, ranging from sectoral ministries, the under-secretariat for foreign trade, and the development agency TIKA, to NGOs and businesses associations.¹ In addition, Turkish democratization has made the government more accountable to public opinion, entailing both a greater responsiveness to public demands as well as a greater inclination to give

in to populist instincts.² Last but not least, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has developed its own distinctive foreign policy "ideology," characterized by the concepts of "zero problems" with neighbors and "strategic depth," elaborated by current Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu. The doctrine of strategic depth has synthesized the plethora of state and non-state interests that have pushed Turkey into deeper ties with its neighbors. It conceptualizes a foreign policy trend that has been in the making since the end of the Cold War under the leadership of former Turkish Prime Minister and President Turgut Özal in the late 1980s.³

The upshot of this transformation is Turkey's increased eagerness to engage the neighborhood and to pursue an independent foreign policy. This increasingly open, active, and independent foreign policy has achieved some notable successes, but is also plagued with challenges.

² Kirişçi, K., Tocci, N. and Walker, J. (2010) "A Neighborhood Rediscovered: Turkey's Transatlantic Value in the Middle East," *Brussels Forum Working Paper*, Washington, German Marshall Fund of the United States.

³ Altunışık, M. (2009) "Worldviews and Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40, pp. 171-194.

¹ Kirişçi, K. (2009) "The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40, pp. 29-57.



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Amongst the major successes, we can mention Bosnia, Syria, and Iraq. The roots of Turkish activism in the Western Balkans were laid in the 1990s. Beyond participating in NATO interventions in the Balkans,⁴ Ankara

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also played a critical role in brokering a constitutional agreement between Bosnian Muslims and Croats in 1993, which culminated in the Washington Agreement in 1994. Following this trail, more recently, following the failure of the constitutional reform effort in Bosnia in 2006, Turkey has once again stepped into the Balkan quagmire, attempting to mediate between Bosniacs, Croats, and Serbs within the faltering Dayton set-up. In 2009-2010, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu held a series of trilateral meetings with Bosnian and Serb, and Bosnian and Croat leaders. One of the most visible successes was the Serbian parliament's apology for the Srebrenica crimes in 1995.

In the case of Syria, the transformation of Turkey's foreign policy has been stark. In the 1990s, relations between the two countries were marred by historical Syrian grievances over the Turkish province of Hatay, the long-standing dispute over the Euphrates River and, most acutely, Syria's support for the PKK and harboring of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan.⁵ Relations plummeted to the point of a near war between the two countries in October 1998. Since the 1998 Adana agreement establishing direct telephone links, appointing special representatives to each other's country, and establishing bilateral security mechanisms, and Syria's expulsion of Öcalan, bilateral relations have steadily improved. Turkish President Sezer attended Syrian President Hafez al-Assad's funeral in 2000. This was followed by the historical visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad

to Turkey in January 2004, reciprocated by Prime Minister Erdoğan in December 2004, when he visited Damascus to sign a bilateral free trade agreement. In recent years, relations have continued to improve, leading to the signing of a bilateral visa-free agreement and the establishment of a Strategic Cooperation Council in October 2009, and the commitment to forge a trade and visa-free zone including Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon in June 2010.

Relations with Iraq, hampered since the first Gulf War by mutual suspicions between Ankara and Erbil, also improved markedly, giving rise to a burgeoning relationship between Turkey and Iraq, and in particular the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).⁶ With the elimination of the PKK as a serious military threat and Turkey's growing acknowledgement that its Kurdish problem could not be solved by military force alone, the continued stability offered by the KRG in Northern Iraq has become a major opportunity for Turkey. Since 2007-8, Turkey has come to accept Iraqi Kurdish autonomy, has opened official ties with the KRG, and has deepened its social, political, and economic influence in Iraq. Bilateral trade reached \$5 billion in 2008, with Turkey predicting a rise to \$25 billion over the next three to four years. As much as 80 percent of foreign direct investment in the region comes from Turkey.⁷ The creation of a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2009 between Turkey and Iraq is a further indicator of just how far these two former enemies have come in recent years.

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Turning from successes to pending challenges and flash-points in Turkish foreign policy, worth mentioning are the festering Cyprus conflict, the stalled rapprochement with

⁴ Oğuzlu, T. and Güngör, U. (2006) "Peace Operations and the Transformation of Turkey's Security Policy," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 472-488.

⁵ Altunışık, M. and Tür, Ö. (2006) "From distant neighbours to partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish relations," *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 37, No.2, pp.229-48.

⁶ Barkey, H. J. (2010) "Turkey's New Engagement in Iraq," *Special Report*, No. 237, Washington, United States Institute for Peace.

⁷ Malka, H. (2009) "Turkey and the Middle East: Rebalancing Interests," in *Turkey's Evolving Dynamics*, Final Report of the CSIS US-Turkey Strategic Initiative, Washington, CSIS, March.



Armenia, the deterioration of relations with Israel and the divergences between Turkey and the West over Iran. As for Cyprus, in its early years in office, the AKP distinguished itself for U-turning Turkey's traditional *dictat* that no solution is the solution in Cyprus. Not only did the Turkish government accept a bi-zonal and bi-communal federal settlement in Cyprus, but also embraced the detailed Annan Plan, set forth by the United Nations. As is well known, the Plan foundered upon the Greek Cypriot "No" in the 2004 referendum. Following the 2004 debacle, bi-communal negotiations in Cyprus resumed after the election of Demetris Christofias in February 2008. In this ongoing saga, Turkey has taken a backseat. Resting on the laurels of the Annan Plan and arguing that the burden of proof regarding a genuine commitment to a federal solution rests on the Greek Cypriot side, Ankara has supported the talks, without going out of its way to spur an agreement. A few miles away from the Turkish coastland, Cyprus continues to escape the activism of a Turkish foreign policy intent in pursuing zero problems with neighbors.

Equally unresolved remain Turkey's ties with Armenia. Again, under the AKP government, Turkey made unprecedented steps to restore relations with Yerevan, brought to a standstill after Turkey closed its border with Armenia in the context of the Nagorno Karabakh war in 1993. Following the football diplomacy between Turkish President Abdullah Gül and his Armenian counterpart Serg Sarkisian in 2008, the two countries moved towards reconciliation, culminating with the signature of two protocols in October 2009.⁸ Since then, relations have foundered, as Turkey insisted that ratification of the protocols hinged on movement on the Nagorno Karabakh peace process. To date, the protocols, while not officially withdrawn, remain pending ratification.

Finally, Turkish foreign policy has also been marked by new problems. Critical amongst these is the sharp deterioration of Turkish-Israeli ties. Gone are the days of the strategic alliance between Turkey and Israel, based on the *realpolitik* bedrock of the Turkish-Syrian rivalry and legitimized (in Turkey) by the Oslo process. Particularly since 2009 – i.e., well after the rise of the AKP – relations have been hampered by Turkish accusations of Israel's conduct in

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the Israeli-Arab conflict and Israeli rhetorical retaliation.⁹ The crisis escalated in May 2010 into a bilateral problem, when the Israel Defense Forces killed eight Turkish citizens on board a Turkish vessel, part of an international flotilla carrying humanitarian goods to Gaza. The Turkish-Israeli relationship seems to have undergone a structural turn. This does not mean that Turkish-Israeli relations will always and necessarily be bad, let alone that the manifold ties between Turkey and Israel at the political/diplomatic, economic and movement of people levels will be broken. But with the magic of the Oslo years over and with Turkey's relationship with Syria no longer marked by the tensions of the past, it does mean that the Turkish-Israeli relationship is unlikely to have the military-strategic flavor of the 1990s.

A last flashpoint regards the distancing between Turkey and the West over Iran's nuclear program. In the 2000s, brought together by joint concerns over the PKK and Iraq, Turkey and Iran have cooperated in the security realm. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan visited Iran in 2004 to sign an agreement branding the PKK as a terrorist organization and the two countries stepped up efforts to protect their common border against the PKK and its affiliates through intelligence-sharing and joint operations. Alongside security cooperation, Turkey and Iran have also been bound by an increasingly close economic relationship, driven by Turkish energy imports from Iran, and the Turkish desire to penetrate the Iranian market in order to compensate for the notable trade imbalance in Iran's favor. Improving Turkish-Iranian ties explain Turkey's position regarding the Iranian nuclear question. Turkey does not feel as threatened as its

⁸ The two protocols signed by Turkey and Armenia in October 2009 provide for the development of bilateral relations (including the establishment of diplomatic relations and of a commission of historians) and for the opening of the border between the two countries.

⁹ Öktem, K. (2009) "Turkey and Israel: ends and beginnings," *Open Democracy*, 10 December 2009, www.opendemocracy.net



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partners in the West by Iran's nuclear program.¹⁰ But Turkey is concerned about a nuclear arms race in its neighborhood. Hence, Turkey's calls for a nuclear-free region and its vote against United Nations Security Council sanctions against Iran, which would hinder burgeoning relations with its neighbor without necessarily bringing about a nuclear-free Middle East any closer.¹¹

Turkey's Neighborhood Policy Viewed from Brussels

How do Europeans respond to these developments in Turkey's neighborhood and in Turkish foreign policy? What are the implications for European perceptions of Turkey and its place in Europe? Perhaps unsurprisingly, European reactions to Turkey's neighborhood policies are filtered through *a priori* European views of Turkey and Turkey's EU accession prospects. Simply put, reactions differ markedly, depending on whether the European subject in question is supportive or critical of Turkey and its EU future.

Turco-skeptics in Europe have lambasted Turkey's neighborhood policy, viewing it as the ironclad proof of Turkey's un-European vocation. Many Europeans, particularly on the center-right of the political spectrum, have been critical of Turkey's policies in the Middle East, echoing the chorus

¹⁰ *Transatlantic Trends 2010 Topline Data*, http://www.gmfus.org/trends/doc/2010_English_Top.pdf, p. 43.

¹¹ As argued by Foreign Minister Davutoğlu (2009), the fallout for Turkey of an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran or an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel would be equally disastrous. Hence, Turkey's repeated calls for a nuclear-free region and its objections to sanctioning Iran, which would hinder burgeoning commercial relations with its neighbor without accomplishing the desiderata of a nuclear-free Middle East.

across the Atlantic on Turkey's lamentable "axis shift." German Christian Democrat Wolfgang Schäuble dubbed Turkey's overtures to the Middle East as "suspicious."¹² Several observers in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the U.K. have been outspokenly skeptical of Turkey's criticisms of Israel, its warmth towards Iran, and its rejection of UN Security Council sanctions in June 2010 on the grounds of a Turkish-Brazilian mediated deal with Tehran. Whether openly stated or silently suspected, the belief is that Europe may be "losing" Turkey and Turkey's EU vocation,¹³ as Turkey becomes increasingly "Islamic" and abandons the Kemalist tenet of "Westernization."¹⁴

Turco-skeptics also point to the fact that despite Ankara's overtures, the two neighborhood questions that lie closest to the heart of Turkey's accession process – Armenia and Cyprus – remain unsolved. The EU has not made the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border and the normalization of bilateral relations a condition for Turkey's EU membership. Notwithstanding, Armenia often features in EU criticism of Turkey. The EU calls for all accession candidates to resolve outstanding difficulties with their neighbors before acceding to the EU. The 2008 Accession Partnership document stated that Turkey should "unequivocally commit to good neighborly relations; address any sources of friction with neighbors."¹⁵ The Cyprus conflict instead has already led to the freezing of 14 chapters in Turkey's protracted accession talks in view of Turkey's non-implementation of the Additional Protocol extending the EU-Turkey Customs Union Agreement to Cyprus. In everything but name, a solution in Cyprus has become a condition for Turkey's EU membership. Not only is this the case, but, with the fading memory of the Annan Plan, Turco-skeptic EU actors are beginning to point their fingers at Turkey for Cyprus' persisting stalemate. In a January 2011 statement, which did little to help the peace process, German Chancellor Merkel in a joint press statement with her Greek Cypriot counterpart declared that "while you [i.e., the Greek Cypriot side]

¹² Wolfgang Schäuble, homepage, <http://www.wolfgang-schaeuble.de/> (accessed June 2010).

¹³ Barysch, K. (2010) "Can Turkey Combine EU Accession and Regional Leadership," January, London, Centre for European Reform; Kramer, H (2009) "Turkey's Accession Process to the EU: The Agenda behind the Agenda," *SWP Comments*, October, Berlin, SWP, p. 4.

¹⁴ Interviews with French scholar and French journalist, Paris, March 2010. Interview with Spanish diplomat, Washington, March 2010. Conversation with British diplomat, Washington, March 2010.

¹⁵ Council of the EU (2008) "Council Decision of 18 February 2008 on the principles, priorities, and conditions contained in the Accession Partnership with the Republic of Turkey and repealing Decision 2006/35/EC," (2008/157/EC), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:051:0004:01:EN:HTML>



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are ready for an honorable compromise, we have noticed that the Turkish side did not respond to your steps.”¹⁶

The European tune is remarkably different when listening to Turco-philes. When it comes to Cyprus and Armenia, while hoping for a speedy resolution, supporters of Turkey’s accession highlight the steps forward made by Turkish

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authorities. In the case of Armenia, the Council of Ministers “welcomes the significant diplomatic efforts made to normalize relations with Armenia, resulting in the historic signature of protocols for the normalization of relations in October 2009. It looks forward to the ratification and implementation of the protocols as soon as possible.”¹⁷ In the case of Cyprus, with the advent of the UN Annan Plan and the entry of the Republic of Cyprus in the EU in 2004, EU-Turkey-Cyprus dynamics have changed. In the eyes of many, Turkey is no longer the chief culprit of the enduring Cyprus stalemate and Greek Cypriot tactics within EU institutions stalling Turkey’s accession talks and the Commission’s Direct Trade Regulation to lift the isolation of northern Cyprus are silently considered as evidence that in 2004, the EU made a mistake to accept a divided Cyprus in to the EU’s fold.

Turning elsewhere in the neighborhood, Turkey’s efforts in the Balkans have been appreciated by many as an important contribution to the stabilization of Europe. They have lent credibility to the arguments of those highlighting the assets that Turkey’s security and defense capabilities would bring to bear on the fledging CSDP. In the Middle East, Turkey’s improving relationships with Syria and the KRG have been openly appreciated by the European Commission.¹⁸ More

¹⁶ “Merkel’s remarks on Cyprus stemmed from a mistake or wrong briefing, Turkish MFA says,” *Trend*, 13 January 2011, <http://en.trend.az/regions/met/turkey/1810626.html>

¹⁷ Council of the EU (2009) *2984th Council meeting, General Affairs*, Brussels, 7 December 2009, 17217/09 (Presse 370).

¹⁸ Commission of the EC (2009) *Turkey 2009 Progress Report*, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010, Brussels, COM(2009) 533, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/candidate-countries/turkey/key-documents/index_en.htm, p. 30.

broadly, Turkey’s cooperation with its southern neighbors reflects both the EU’s own vision embodied in the European Neighborhood Policy¹⁹ and the norms of a “Europeanized” Turkish foreign policy.²⁰ Even on the Iranian nuclear dossier, U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron deemed Turkey the European country “with the greatest chance of persuading Iran.”²¹ More broadly, at an informal meeting in September 2010, EU Foreign Ministers, recognizing Turkey’s increasing clout in the neighborhood, proposed to their Turkish counterpart to establish an EU-Turkey “strategic dialogue” on foreign policy matters.

However, European appreciation of Turkey’s foreign policy activism in the neighborhood has not necessarily entailed a clear-cut increase in support for Turkey’s EU membership overall. For some, Turkey’s efforts to promote peace and stability abroad are praiseworthy but do not constitute a reason to back Turkey’s EU membership. Muslim countries may be inclined to listen to Ankara more than Brussels, yet this proves that Turkey can be a useful ally rather than

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member of the EU. Others have questioned the implications of Turkey’s neighborhood activism for Turkey’s readiness to comply with EU positions in foreign policy matters. Heinz Kramer posed a rhetorical question: “how much supranationalism is compatible with the idea of Turkey as repre-

¹⁹ Aydın Düzgüt, S. and Tocci, N. (2009) “Transforming Turkish foreign policy: The quest for regional leadership and Europeanization,” *Commentary*, November, Brussels, CEPS.

²⁰ Özcan, M. (2008) *Harmonizing Foreign Policy: Turkey, the European Union and the Middle East*, Aldershot, Ashgate.

²¹ International Crisis Group (2010) “Turkey’s Crisis over Israel and Iran,” *Europe Report*, No. 208, 8 September, Brussels and Istanbul, p. 14.



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sented by the concept of ‘strategic depth?’²² The contrast between Turkey’s visa liberalization policy and the EU’s restrictive Schengen system is a stark case in point.

In conclusion, Turkey’s increased activism in the shared EU-Turkey neighborhood has not gone unnoticed in Europe. Predictably, it has been used to bolster and legitimize pre-existing views of Turkey and its prospects of EU accession. Opponents of Turkey’s EU membership have tended to echo voices across the Atlantic lamenting Turkey’s drift to the East, while criticizing the fact that “zero problems” has so far escaped the two most pressing neighborhood issues for the EU: Cyprus and Armenia. Supporters of Turkey’s accession course have heralded Turkey’s new activism and its increasing reliance on soft power tools, both emphasizing the strategic assets embedded in Turkey’s EU entry and arguing that Turkey’s foreign policy is becoming quintessentially “European.” Yet on balance, whereas European praise has outweighed the criticism, this has not translated into a net increase in support for Turkey’s EU membership. Strategic considerations have never represented the make-it-or-break-it of Turkey’s EU future. More important, however, supporters of Turkey’s EU membership have yet to mount a convincing argument explaining why Turkey’s strategic assets can only be reaped with Turkey sitting with full rights and obligations at the EU’s decision-making table.

²² Kramer, H. (2010) “AKP’s ‘new’ foreign policy between vision and pragmatism,” *Working paper*, 1 June 2010, Berlin, SWP, p. 31.

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