



TURKISH INDUSTRIALISTS' AND BUSINESSMEN'S ASSOCIATION
WASHINGTON OFFICE

Anatolian Janusⁱ: The AKP's Strategic Depth Doctrine and Turkey's Reemergence in the Middle East

Susae Elanchennyⁱⁱ
TÜSİAD-US Intern, August 2008

This paper represents the author's own analysis and view and does not necessarily reflect the position or opinions of TÜSİAD-US unless otherwise stated. Any mistakes contained herein are the author's own. She can be reached at susae.elanchenny@gmail.com.

Abstract

Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey has reemerged as a major power in the Middle East, mediating between Israel and Syria and facilitating in the nuclear standoff between Iran and the US. For some, this signals that Turkey has turned away from the West and joined ranks with the Muslim-majority countries it borders; for others, that the US is no longer an unrivaled power in the region. However, neither of these analyses is completely accurate. Turkey's current foreign policy of active engagement to resolve regional conflicts in order to enhance its regional power, also known as the Strategic Depth Doctrine, is the brainchild of the AKP, not the entire Turkish foreign policy establishment. While Turkey's mediation has taken place without the US, Turkey's goals in the region still generally match the US's. Turkey's efforts may well prove futile, yet they reflect a true shift in the balance of power in the region and a change from past Turkish foreign policy, one that will affect US strategy in the region for the foreseeable future.

ⁱ Janus was the ancient god of Roman mythology who had two faces, looking in opposite directions. He represented a transition between the two directions, and between the past and the future.

ⁱⁱ The author would like to thank Liam Hardy of TÜSİAD-US for his extremely helpful edits of this paper. She would also like to extend her appreciation to Dr. Ömer Taşpınar of the Brookings Institution, Dr. Frank Tachau of the Middle East Institute, Mr. Abdullah Akyuz of TÜSİAD-US and Ms. Sonay Kanber for their insight.

Introduction

Within the past year Turkey has become actively engaged in diplomacy in the Middle East as the regional mediator between Syria and Israel and possibly between Iran and the United States, Britain, China, France, and Russia plus Germany (P5 plus 1). Not only has the Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led Turkish government been the instigator of these negotiations, but it has also done so independently of, if not in outright opposition to, official US policy in the region. This paper will:

- 1) Examine the causes, both historical and contemporary, of Turkey's new, assertive policy in the Middle East;
- 2) Determine whether this policy is temporary and specific to the particular ideological makeup of the AKP, or a more permanent one for Turkey and all of its political players;
- 3) Assess the implications of Turkey's new, strengthened regional role for US policy in the Middle East generally, and for US-Turkish relations in particular.

Given the certainty for change in political leadership of the American and Israeli governments in the fall of 2008, this paper will not contain definite predictions about the course these negotiations will take. Rather, it will seek to analyze Turkey's current foreign policy within both the current context of the relevant state actors' domestic politics and the broader context of the impact of US involvement in the region.

Turkish Foreign Policy: from "Strategic Partnership" to "Strategic Depth"

During the decades immediately following its creation in 1923, the Republic of Turkey focused more on domestic reforms than on international affairs. While the revered founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, enacted domestic policies meant to make Turkish language, dress, and culture closer to those of European countries, Turkey's foreign policy up to and during most of World War II was one of balance, neutrality, caution, and isolationism. Known as "Kemalism," this foreign policy approach gave privilege to a Western European-orientation over a Middle Eastern one yet cautioned against Turkey's direct involvement in international relations.¹ Although early Turkish foreign policy makers were originally suspicious of the European colonial powers because of their role in dividing up the areas of present-day Turkey after World War I, Turkey's exclusive focus on domestic policy reflected its desire to join and compete with the West by adopting Western reforms.

Although suspicion of European intentions in Turkey lingered, by the end of World War II this was superseded by the geopolitical realities of the new Cold War order. As a medium-sized developing power in the inter-war period Turkey could afford to remain neutral and isolated. However, in the Cold War its location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and on the border of the USSR and the Eastern bloc countries, impelled it to choose between the competing ideologies of the Soviet Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bloc. A "strategic partnership" between the US and Turkey thus emerged when Turkey's leaders chose to align the country with NATO and the other Western capitalist states. During the Cold War, the common long-term national interest of the United States and Turkey was clear: containing and countering the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence. This Cold War alliance was thus mostly a military-based one. The United States backed Turkey's successful bid to join NATO in 1952, and Turkey sent troops to fight alongside American ones in the Korean War (1950-1953). Turkey also sought to bolster its economic ties to Europe during this period by becoming an associate member of the European Economic Community (EEC), the precursor organization to

the EU, in 1963. During the Cold War period Turkey was not only pro-American and pro-European in its foreign policy, it was also content to let foreign policy be shaped in its essentials by these powers under the conviction that Western and Turkish foreign policy interests and goals, particularly concerning Turkey's neighbors, were one and the same.

In 1991, however, the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the first Gulf War marked a new phase in Turkish foreign policy. With the threat of Soviet expansion removed, Turkey could re-evaluate its foreign policy goals and orientation. Turgut Özal, founder of the Motherland Party, through which he governed Turkey as Prime Minister and then President from 1983 until 1993, introduced a significantly new foreign policy vision for Turkey, known today as neo-Ottomanism. In contrast to Kemalism, Özal's neo-Ottomanism held that Turkey should be actively engaged in international politics, particularly in the areas it borders. This ideology also emphasized Turkey's both Muslim and secular democratic character.² In his rhetoric Özal supported the side of Bosnian Muslims in the Bosnian War and the beginning of a dialogue with the Kurds, partly based on the shared Muslim faith of the Kurdish and Turkish people.³ However, Özal's steadfast support of the First Gulf War, which was seen by many Muslims as an act of aggression by Christian powers against a Muslim one, showed that his wish to make Turkey a regional superpower trumped religious considerations. Furthermore, Özal's decision to allow US troops to use Turkish territory and bases to invade Iraq proved that, in Özal's foreign policy vision, Turkey did not have to choose between being a major regional player and maintaining a strategic partnership with the US – it could do both.

While the essentials of Kemalism and Neo-Ottomanism have remained the same since the election of the AKP in November of 2002, the adherents of both have adapted to the shifting power dynamics in their region. Proponents of both visions are in the process of re-evaluating Turkey's long-established "strategic relationship" with the US. While this has led some to fear the "reorient[ation of] Turkish policy away from the United States, toward both Europe and the Islamic world,"⁴ others have rightly pointed out that, overall, Turkey's foreign policy goals under the AKP are still in line and in keeping with American ones, and thus will ultimately benefit, not hurt, American interests.⁵

The current Kemalist foreign policy view no longer advocates an unswerving commitment to the West. The troubled and halting progression of Turkey's EU accession talks, including the determined opposition of President Nicholas Sarkozy of France and Prime Minister Angela Merkel of Germany to Turkey's accession, has created a sense of disillusionment and resentment toward Europe among both the general Turkish population and the traditionally pro-Western military generals and civil service bureaucracy. Military relations between Turkey and the US have also cooled, particularly due to perceived US support of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq and its initially tepid efforts at ridding northern Iraq of the camps of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Kurdish separatist organization based in Turkey and northern Iraq. While relations between the US and Turkey over the Kurdish issue have improved since the US began sharing intelligence with the Turkish military on the PKK in northern Iraq in November 2007, other disagreements and disruptive incidents have had more significant, negative consequences for the relationship, particularly in the Kemalists' view. Foremost among these were the detention of a Turkish Special Forces group by US troops in Iraq in July 2003 and the passage of H.R. 106, labeling the killings of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI as "genocide," in the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the fall of 2007. Present-day Kemalists are thus increasingly looking neither toward Europe and the US nor the Middle East in their foreign policy focus but are rather turning ever more inward, with the exception of dealing with the Kurdish issue in Northern Iraq.

If external political factors, such as the US war in Iraq and the EU accession process, have caused the Kemalists to reconsider their desire to maintain a Westward orientation, those same factors have not so much altered as intensified the main features of the neo-Ottomanist view as envisioned by Özal. The AKP has pursued Özal's goal of making Turkey a respected international power. As Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan noted in his opening statement at the first Ambassadors' Conference in July 2008: "Our goal in the longer term is to raise Turkey to a position of global power"⁶ in Latin America, Africa and South and East Asia; in short, far beyond its borders.⁷ Furthermore, like Özal, Erdoğan and the AKP have matched Turkey's foreign policy with its economic policy, thereby pursuing deeper economic ties with countries around the world.

To a greater degree than Özal, however, the AKP has made the Middle East a foreign policy priority for Turkey. To a certain extent, this is a result of the AKP's Islamic roots: the Kemalist MHP and CHP, for example, almost certainly would not have lobbied for a Turkish man to become the head of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), as did the AKP in June 2004.⁸ Despite its rhetoric, however, the AKP has by no means limited its involvement in the Middle East to only Muslim-majority countries, nor allied itself only with Muslims, as demonstrated in its friendly relationship with Israel.⁹ Furthermore, the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the subsequent inability of the US to establish continuous order and security there; its comparatively lukewarm efforts at trying to establish peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians; and its steadfast refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue with Iran and Syria have left a vacuum of power in the Middle East that the AKP finds necessary for Turkey to fill given the danger of instability in the region. Thus, according to Dr. Frank Tachau of the Middle East Institute, Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East has benefited from the failure of American policy over the last eight years.¹⁰ The AKP's high interest in the Middle East thus cannot be explained by the Islamic identity of AKP politicians alone, but rather in combination with strategic and geopolitical considerations resulting chiefly from US policy in the region.

The ideas of Neo-Ottomanism can be clearly observed in the official foreign policy doctrine of the AKP: the Strategic Depth Doctrine. Conceived by Erdoğan's chief foreign policy adviser, Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Strategic Depth Doctrine champions "Turkish involvement in Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East, while still balancing relations with the United States and Israel."¹¹ The doctrine is based on the idea that Turkey's unique location, Muslim identity, secular democratic political system and Ottoman past make it uniquely suited for exercising soft power influence on its neighbors.¹² The doctrine does not explicitly advocate that Turkey break its alliances with the US and Israel but rather have "zero problems" with its neighbors, even if they are the enemies of Turkey's traditional allies.

More than Özal's neo-Ottomanism, Davutoğlu's doctrine challenges and has run counter to current US foreign policy in the region, if not in its goals, then in its means. The most vivid example of this occurred when the Parliament refused to allow US troops to use Turkish territory to launch the 2003 war in Iraq, which took place roughly five months after the AKP came to control the government.¹³ Although the official rhetoric of foreign policy officials on both sides has hung onto the concept of strategic partnership, a subtle divide can be discerned. Speaking to the Atlantic Council of the United States in June 2008 in Washington, D.C., Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan remarked that the Turkish-Syrian dialogue was "probably suspected about initially because some countries prefer isolationist policies to Syria, which [Turkish officials] thought would only push them to follow more negative policies...Engaging them, talking with them started to give results."¹⁴

Alongside this indirect critique of US Middle East policy, however, the Turkish Foreign Ministry has also gone out of its way to make clear, rhetorically if not in sincerity, that it is not trying to usurp the US's traditional leadership of conflict mediation in the Middle East, particularly regarding the Iran nuclear row. Thus AK Party foreign policy officials have played down Turkey's role, insisting that "We have not interjected ourselves into the mix. Both sides were willing to go through Turkey," and that "Obviously, Turkey is not the United States in this game."¹⁵ Babacan has gone so far as to discourage Turkey's role as being labeled as one of "mediation," but rather favors "facilitator" or "intermediary:" a third-party aiding the international community in achieving common, previously agreed-upon goals, not creating those goals on its own.¹⁶

However, making its primary goal in the Middle East to resolve conflicts peacefully, without military intervention, already puts Turkey at odds with the US, which refuses to rule out using hard power options against Iran, or regime change in Syria. Thus, on the one hand the Strategic Depth Doctrine, as it has been enacted by Davutoğlu and the AKP, is more Middle East-oriented than Özal's neo-Ottomanism. On the other hand, it also attempts to continue Turkey's alliance with the West through enacting EU reforms and maintaining good relations with the US and Israel, traditionally the Kemalist stance.

This hybridity contained in the Strategic Depth Doctrine – of traditional neo-Ottomanism and traditional Kemalism – seems to have been successful at helping Turkey become a more respected and influential power. A leading commentator on Turkish politics, Çengiz Candar, who in fact coined the term "neo-Ottomanism" after the end of the Cold War, believes that the talks are a "win-win' situation for Turkey"¹⁷ Yet a close examination of how the Israel-Syria talks and the Iran-Turkey rapprochement came about, the motivations of all sides, and the US's reaction to them, reveals that the Strategic Depth Doctrine as it is currently being enacted may soon become untenable. At some point, Turkey will need the aid of a stronger state to make the talks successful. That state may not necessarily be the US, however. Franceⁱⁱⁱ or the EU (under its rotating presidency currently occupied by France) may be best suited to play that role.¹⁸ Whether Turkey's current role as mediator or peacemaker will become a permanent facet of Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East for the foreseeable future depends on the outcome of the talks, on the next US president's level of commitment to resolving conflicts in the Middle East, and on the willingness of countries in the region to trust Turkey in this role.

Turkey's Mediation: Israel and Syria

The Israel-Syria talks were not the AKP's first foray into Middle East peace-making. On November 13, 2007, the Turkish Parliament invited Israeli President Shimon Peres and President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas to give a joint speech only a week before the beginning of the Annapolis Conference – the Bush Administration's major initiative on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁹ The joint address, which one analyst called a "public relations coup for Turkey,"²⁰ marked the beginning of a pattern in AKP involvement in Middle East conflict resolution: the willingness of the AKP government to take leadership on peace initiatives parallel to, but not wholly part of, US-led efforts.^{iv.[21]}

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarkozy is also attempting to reinvigorate French diplomacy in the region through the newly created Mediterranean Union.

^{iv}This address also signaled that Israeli-Turkish relations had improved since Turkey hosted Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal in Ankara in February 2006. Mashaal's visit itself took place "without the knowledge of the foreign ministry yet upon Davutoğlu's [...] suggestion," demonstrating the competition and tension within the Turkish foreign policy-making community between the Kemalist-leaning Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and neo-Ottomanist AKP leaders. While the AKP's efforts to play a mediating role between Israel and the Palestinians has

By the time of the Peres-Abbas address, Turkey had already been mediating between Israel and Syria since Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visit to the Turkish capital Ankara in February 2007.²² As of mid-August 2008, four rounds of indirect talks had taken place between Israel and Syria in Istanbul, Turkey, with fifth and sixth rounds scheduled for late August and early September 2008. These talks are the first since direct negotiations between Syria and Israel mediated by US President Bill Clinton failed at Shepherdstown, West Virginia in January 2000.²³ Just as in 2000, the dispute between Israel and Syria centers on the Golan Heights, a rocky plateau about 500 square miles in size located between northeastern Israel and southwestern Syria.²⁴ Originally under Syrian control, the territory was seized by the Israelis in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and then formally annexed in 1981 without the recognition of the international community. The Syrian government desires to re-possess the Golan Heights, which are strategically important because of their high elevation overlooking Israel, up to the July 4, 1967 cease-fire line at the Sea of Galilee, a major source of water in the region. While the Israeli government "accepts the principle of withdrawal on the Golan Heights,"²⁵ it in turn wants Syria's "complete renunciation of support for terror in Hamas, Hizbullah and Iran."²⁶ In addition, David Tal, a Member of Parliament from the Kadima Party, has vowed to make sure that any agreement ceding the Golan Heights to Syria be put to a national referendum in Israel. Polls indicate that a referendum would probably result in a "no" vote, for many Israelis still see the area as indispensable for maintaining Israel's security.²⁷

Because there was no major push by the Israeli public for Israel-Syria peace talks to resume, Ehud Olmert's role in the initiation of peace talks was probably to some extent the result of personal considerations. Almost immediately after taking office, Olmert led Israel into a war against Hezbollah in Lebanon that, because by most accounts Israel lost, diminished his political capital considerably. By the time that the first of many accusations of corruption were made against him in January 2007, Olmert would have benefited from a distraction from his personal woes to salvage his own reputation and his party's chances in the next parliamentary elections. Furthermore, while an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement was highly unlikely by the end of his political career, an Israeli-Syrian deal within the framework of previous talks was just possible. On July 30, 2008, however, a successful end to the talks became less likely when Olmert announced that he would resign from his post after the Kadima Party elects a new leader in early September 2008.

If Olmert's personal isolation made it easier for him to commit Israel to talks, then the increasingly grim consequences of Syria's international isolation from the US and Europe strongly motivated Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to agree to talks. Like Olmert, Al-Assad, who became President in July 2000 after the death of his father and former President Hafiz al-Assad, does not have to think about re-election due in his case to the totalitarian nature of his regime. Recent economic troubles, and the resulting potential for discontent among the Syrian populace, however, certainly played a role in al-Assad's agreement to begin negotiations. Rapidly dwindling oil reserves, huge deficits, and a "profoundly uncertain economic future has created additional incentives for peace, which could help lure foreign investment by ending Syria's pariah status in the West,"²⁸ particularly in the US, which increased sanctions against Syria in 2004.²⁹ Although Syria's deputy Prime Minister Abdallah Dardari has claimed that the "sanctions have failed" and that they amounted to "pressure, but not isolation," Syria's economic troubles and the potential political instability they could cause to al-Assad's regime played a significant role in Syria's involvement in the talks.³⁰

not panned out, the competing views within Turkey's foreign policy establishment that underlay Mashaal's visit remain as a significant factor in Turkey's more successful attempts at mediation between Israel and Syria.

While the domestic political context in both Israel and Syria created a perfect storm of sorts for peace talks to begin, these talks would not have occurred without Turkey's initiation. Despite Babacan's claim that "It was both the Israeli government's and the Syrian government's attempt to come to us and ask us to help,"³¹ news reports have established that Erdoğan and the AKP government first approached Olmert and al-Assad about mediation.³² The AKP has been making the case repeatedly that it is the ideal mediator in this dispute due to its friendly relations and trusted status with both parties. In recent history, however, Turkey has had periods of at best strained, and at worst hostile, relations with both Israel and Syria.

While Turkey is now seeking to avoid armed conflict between Israel and Syria, less than a decade ago Turkey itself almost went to war with Syria over its support for the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan.³³ While that conflict was settled without war, disputes over water rights and the border territory of the Hatay province provided further reasons for disagreement. Relations have improved since the AKP came to power in 2002, however, as shown by al-Assad's visit to Ankara in January 2004, the first by a Syrian President since the country became independent in the 1940s.³⁴ Today, according to Syrian information minister Mehdi Dakhlallah, Syria is "Turkey's closest Arab ally."³⁵ For Sunni-majority Syria, its attempt to foster better relations with Turkey is unsurprising: its increasing isolation from the West has forced it to ally itself more and more with Shiite-majority Iran, a relationship that disproportionately favors Iran. Turkey's warm relationship with Syria has not yet caused Syria to abandon completely its relationship with Iran and Hezbollah, however. Indeed, Al-Assad visited Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran, Iran just days before he met with Erdoğan in Bodrum, Turkey in early August 2008. Even if the Israeli-Syrian negotiations do not end in a peace deal, Turkey and Syria's rapprochement means that Iran will not be the sole guide of Syrian foreign policy in the future, a development that benefits not just Turkey but also Israel.

Relations between Israel and Turkey have been generally positive, especially when compared to Israel's relations with its Muslim Arab neighbors, yet they have also been punctuated by serious disagreements. On the one hand, Turkey was among the first countries to recognize Israel in March 1949. Israel and Turkey have signed a series of free trade agreements, which resulted in Turkey becoming Israel's largest trade partner in the Middle East in 2005.³⁶ Turkey conducts joint exercises with the Israeli military that require the sharing of potentially sensitive intelligence information and buys military hardware from Israeli defense contractors. The two countries also signed a military cooperation accord in 1996 despite the angry objections of some Arab Muslim countries.³⁷ On the other hand, various Turkish governments, both secularist and Islamist, have publicly supported the Palestinians against Israel, in rhetoric if not in more tangible support. The AKP has been no exception to this rule: Erdoğan called Israel's assassination of Hamas's spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin a "terrorist act" in March 2004.³⁸ Yet overall, the AKP and Sharon and Olmert's governments have managed to deepen and strengthen their countries' military, economic, and cultural ties despite disagreements.

The AKP's decision to initiate mediation did not just result from its desire to increase its power in the Middle East and capitalize on its good relations with its neighbors. The AKP also hopes that Turkey's role as a mediator in the Middle East will boost its chances of getting a temporary seat on the UN Security Council in the short term and EU membership in the long term.³⁹ Furthermore, Turkey seeks to establish regional allies in its fight against the PKK while projecting a positive image of itself as a peaceful nation. Finally, to a large degree the AKP's involvement in the Middle East is the result of the shifting balance of power in the region. The US emboldened Iran by removing its long-time enemy Saddam Hussein from Iraq and installing

a weak, easily manipulated Shiite-majority government in his place, and it established a virtually autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq. While Turkey's relations with its European neighbors, including Greece, have stabilized if not steadily improved in recent years, its conflict-prone Middle Eastern neighbors still present a high threat to its security. In this context, Turkey's mediation of the Israel-Syria conflict seems unremarkable. Less readily apparent is the rationale for Turkey to facilitate talks between Iran, its "tacit rival"⁴⁰ in the region, and the US, which has hardly embraced Turkey's efforts.

Turkey's "Facilitation:" Iran and the US

Unlike the current Israel-Syria talks, the Iran-P5 plus 1 talks were initiated long before Turkey expressed its desire to be involved. What exact form Turkey's "facilitation" has taken remains unclear; Babacan himself described Turkey as having an "unnamed role" in the talks.⁴¹ What Babacan has made publicly clear is that Turkey strongly desires to be a player in the negotiations. Çandar has gone so far as to propose that the P5 plus 1, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, "should be perceived as '5 + 1 + 1'" with Turkey's voluntary participation.⁴² Turkey's wish to prevent conflict in Iran follows logically from the AKP's "zero-problem" policy with its neighbors and is, in its theoretical justification, consistent with the Israel-Syria mediation efforts. To a greater extent than in its Israel-Syria mediation, however, Turkey's involvement in the Iran nuclear row calls into question its ability to mediate on multiple fronts without harming its "friendly" relationship with all of the countries involved and highlights divisions within the Turkish foreign policy establishment about the AKP's foreign policy.

While Turkey is the only mediator at the table in the Israel-Syria talks, Turkey is not present at the negotiations between the P5 plus 1, led by EU Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana, and Iran, whose lead nuclear negotiator is Saeed Jalili. Instead, Turkey's role involves being "actively in touch with the parties," particularly the United States and Iran.⁴³ Turkey's meetings with the two sides have not occurred at the same time, but they have come close: on July 17, 2008 US National Security Advisor Steven Hadley met with Babacan in Ankara just a day before Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki did the same. While the substance of these meetings have not been made public, the fact that they took place immediately before the latest round of talks between the P5 plus 1 and Iran in Geneva on July 19 strongly suggests that the nuclear issue was the focus of discussion.

The AKP and the Bush Administration share the goal of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. However, Babacan has repeatedly voiced Turkey's position that Iran has a right to produce nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. While the US does not deny this right, it is much less trusting of Iran's motives than it seems is Turkey.⁴⁴ More importantly, while the US and to a greater extent Israel have not ruled out using military force to try to destroy the nuclear plants if negotiations fail, Turkey's ultimate goal is to resolve the row peacefully, without a conflict that could further destabilize the region. Thus Babacan noted after his meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the State Department that "Turkey and Iran...are [like Iran and Iraq] also neighbors and we have a dialogue with them."⁴⁵ As with Syria, Turkey's willingness to engage in dialogue with Iran directly contradicts official Bush Administration policy of isolating Iran. Perhaps partly due to Hadley's talks with Babacan, however, the US backtracked on its vow not to negotiate with Iran before it stopped enriching uranium at the July 19 Geneva meeting, which was attended by US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns.⁴⁶ Marking a significant shift in Turkey's Middle East foreign policy, Turkey did not change its foreign policy to match the US's, but rather the US made its strategy more in line with Turkey's.

Even if Burn's presence at the negotiating table signaled a new willingness on the part of the US to pursue diplomatic means that Turkey supports, Turkey's ability to act as a neutral facilitator is hindered by the lack of enthusiasm for its efforts by both the US and Iran. In May 2006 US Ambassador to Turkey Ross Wilson made it clear that "Neither we [the US] nor anybody else are looking for an intermediary...We're not looking for Turkey for that role."⁴⁷ By June 2008 the US had somewhat softened its stance, asserting that "active Turkish engagement in the Middle East and around the world is something that the United States very much welcomes," yet envisioning Turkey's role in the Iran talks as limited to its membership in the UN.⁴⁸ While Babacan has publicly agreed with the US's vision for Turkey in this dispute, Turkey has taken it upon itself to engage with Iran independently, without the presence of the UN, NATO, or other international bodies of which Turkey is a member. Thus on August 14, 2008 Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made a trip to Istanbul, where he met with Erdoğan and Turkish President Abdullah Gül. Like the Bush Administration, however, Ahmadinejad refrained from terming Turkey's efforts as mediation but rather as a "friendly effort."⁴⁹ Indeed, it seems that a planned energy agreement to transport Iranian gas to Turkey for domestic consumption, a deal which the US opposes, was a major point of the talks.⁵⁰ Ultimately, the US, Iran and Turkey are all pursuing different ends and means in their policies: the US seeks to force Iran to make its nuclear program transparent through isolation; Iran to decrease the impact of its isolation and to buy time to stall on the nuclear negotiations through improving its relations with Turkey; and Turkey to increase its clout through playing a mediating role in which neither side is interested.

Given that Ahmadinejad's visit was his first to a NATO country, and that it occurred only days after Iran ignored the deadline for the so-called "freeze for freeze" deal offered by the P5 plus 1 group, the international reaction to the visit was surprisingly mild. Gabi Levy, the Israeli ambassador to Turkey, preemptively called Ahmadinejad's visit "unfortunate, especially in this sensitive time when Iran is refusing to give a clear and direct answer to the international community regarding its nuclear program," and given Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust and Israel's right to exist.⁵¹ Yet the Israeli government neither publicly acted on its disappointment with Turkey over the visit nor made more strongly-worded statements. While some have condemned Turkey's reckless policy of refusing to isolate Iran, the Bush Administration's reaction was muted.⁵² To some extent the US's and Israel's unimpassioned reaction might reflect the fact that Turkey and Iran did not sign off on the energy deal.⁵³ More importantly, however, the US and Israel currently trust that Turkey wishes to remain their ally and will not act against their common interests. The two powers probably also calculate that Turkey is still too weak and unstable a country to impede their efforts against Iran, even if it wished to.

If Washington and Jerusalem's reaction to Ahmadinejad's visit was calm, the opposite is true of the reaction of the Turkish public and news media. The Iranian president was greeted enthusiastically by crowds of supporters outside of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, yet he also enraged Kemalists by refusing to visit Anıtkabir, Atatürk's tomb, as is protocol for visiting heads of state.⁵⁴ The meeting was thus downgraded from an "official state visit" to a "working visit" and moved from Ankara to Istanbul. While Babacan and Ahmadinejad both sought to downplay the incident, it served as a timely reminder of the historically tense relations between Turkey and Iran since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. It was only in 1999 that the secularist-majority Turkish government fell out with Iran over its public support of Mevri Kavakçı, an MP of the Islamist Virtue Party who refused to remove her headscarf in the Turkish Parliament.⁵⁵ This episode highlights the fear felt by many Kemalists that Turkey could become an Islamic state like Iran if an Islamist party like the AKP gains too much power. This fear most certainly

factored into the Constitutional Court case brought against the AKP in March 2008 to shut down the party, largely for its attempt to lift the headscarf ban in universities. While the court ruled that the AKP could remain intact, it also found the AKP guilty of “anti-secularist activities,” implicitly in both its foreign and domestic policy. The Kemalist reaction against the AKP underscores the fact that Turkey’s entire current foreign policy establishment cannot be interpreted as having undergone a fundamental change in its way of thinking about Turkey’s place in international affairs simply because of Turkey’s current foreign policy goals and orientation, which are largely specific to the AKP.

Overall, Turkey’s recent initiative to mediate the Israel-Syria talks and to facilitate relations between Iran and the US results from the same combination of Davutoğlu’s Strategic Depth Doctrine and balance of power considerations. The fact that the AKP came to power just before the US invasion of Iraq is the most important factor in understanding how the AKP turned its wish to play a more active role in the Middle East into a reality. It also explains Turkey’s ultimate motivation behind its participation in the Iran-US negotiations: to avoid another war in the Middle East. However, claims that “Turkey has broken ranks with the West”⁵⁶ and that “Washington has been essentially irrelevant”⁵⁷ in Turkey’s current efforts ignore the ultimate benefits to US interests of Turkey’s mediation.

Implications for the US

Since the news of Turkey’s mediation between Israel and Syria without the US broke, some analysts cited the US’s “slightly astonishing nonparticipation” as evidence of the decline of its power and influence.⁵⁸ While White House Press Secretary Dana Perino insisted that “they [the Israelis] had kept us apprised from the beginning of the initiative, so...I was asked if we were surprised, and no, we were not,”⁵⁹ Israel pursued the talks with Syria in spite of the Bush Administration’s reported refusal of an offer to mediate and its wish for the Palestinian-Israeli peace process to be the central focus of regional diplomacy.⁶⁰ At the same time, however, both Olmert and al-Assad have stated publicly that they would like the US to be involved in the talks. Al-Assad has gone so far as to say that direct talks will only occur when a “new US administration that can broker such negotiations takes office.”⁶¹ Furthermore, despite Ahmadinejad’s anti-American rhetoric, Iran still regards the US as the major player in its negotiations with the P5 plus 1 group. While Middle Eastern governments thus may very well be “moving beyond the Bush Administration”⁶² specifically, they are not moving beyond US involvement and influence in the region generally. Turkey’s mediation in the Middle East signals not a decline in absolute terms of US power in the Middle East but rather a shift in the balance of power in the region. No longer the hegemon in a unipolar world, the US now must act within a system in which regional actors in the Middle East and their backers outside of it increasingly set the terms of policy formation and enactment.⁶³ As a result of this new world order and in the context of American and Turkish domestic politics, three major implications for the US can be identified.

1. **For the foreseeable future, the US can no longer expect to be the only major mediator of conflict at all stages in the Middle East.** Even if the next US President reinvigorates US diplomacy in the region, or if the AKP loses its control of the Turkish government to a secularist party, Turkey’s current policy of deepening its economic relationship with Syria and Iran means it has more of a stake in the peaceful resolution of conflict concerning those countries. The US will have to be more willing to include all relevant regional actors in its diplomatic efforts, as it has recently done in its

encouragement of Iraq's neighbors to step up their diplomatic presence in Iraq, in order to make the negotiations successful.

2. **The US cannot assume that Turkey would support it in military action against Iran or Syria.** Many pundits have pointed out the difficulties for the US or Israel in carrying out a military strike against Iran for tactical reasons, such as the fact that most of its nuclear facilities are underground and thus would be hard to destroy completely through bombing.⁶⁴ Yet an equally important difficulty would be Turkish opposition to the move – likely under either the current AKP government or a Kemalist one. Such opposition would complicate both the tactical planning of the bombings itself, and the attempt to restore order in the region afterward.

3. **The US and Turkey no longer have the “strategic partnership” that they had in the Cold War era.** When Turkey was an economically and politically closed country, the “strategic partnership” between it and the US was under US guidance and direction; yet “the United States has never shown much interest in pursuing this concept,” except when it furthered US-defined strategy and interests.⁶⁵ Since Özal's tenure as Prime Minister Turkey has become a stronger state, less dependent on the West for its economic and military well-being, and thus has begun to seek independence in its foreign policy. Turkey's relationship with the US in the present and in the immediate future should be viewed as similar to the relationship Washington has with Paris or London: allies who can disagree on the means taken to achieve the same ultimate goals. For the term “strategic partnership” to be relevant in describing the current state of Turkish-US relations, it must be understood in this context.

Conclusions

While Turkey has to some extent stepped into the mediating role in the Middle East “usually reserved for US secretaries of state,”⁶⁶ there is not much indication that Turkey's current efforts will be more successful than previous US ones. The Israel-Syria talks are still taking place at a low, indirect level and have stalled on the border demarcation of the Golan Heights, the same issue that caused US-mediated talks to fall apart in 2000.⁶⁷ Furthermore, all of the top contenders to replace Olmert – Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz of the Kadima Party and Benjamin Netanyahu of the opposition Likud Party – have publicly expressed skepticism about the talks.⁶⁸ Netanyahu and Mofaz are also known to support bombing Iran's nuclear facilities.⁶⁹ More importantly, the two candidates vying to become the next US president have signaled that they would approach these conflicts from starkly different perspectives: John McCain would more be more likely to isolate Syria and to bomb Iran than Barack Obama, who plans to hold talks with the leaders of both countries without preconditions at the beginning of his presidency. All of these factors leave the future of the talks highly uncertain.

Unlike the US's or Israel's, Turkey's current political leadership is not set to change in the immediate future. One can thus expect that the AKP will continue to pursue a more assertive, independent strategy in the Middle East and in the other regions that Turkey borders. However, the AKP will increasingly face internal and external resistance and complications to its

strategic depth approach to foreign policy. The fact that the AKP announced its idea of a “Caucasian Stability and Partnership Platform,” even as Russian and Georgian troops continued fighting, lends credence to charges that the AKP’s attempts to mediate “on all fronts” is naïve and overreaching. Indeed, both al-Assad and Ahmadinejad have voiced strong support for the Russian government, which supplies both countries with weapons, further complicating the peace talks.⁷⁰

Ultimately, the AKP’s attempt at mediating between Israel and Syria and Iran and the US is neither wholly naïve nor wholly realistic, but rather reflects the uncertainty of a growing power unsure of its place in global politics.⁷¹ It also marks a significant shift away from the Kemalism that defined Turkish foreign policy for decades. While the AKP will probably be forced to scale back the “depth” in its Strategic Depth Doctrine, its efforts have made Turkey a major player in the Middle East in a way that will have ramifications for both the US and the region for years to come. For how long the AKP will be able to present Turkey as an Anatolian mold of the ancient Roman god Janus, facing East and West yet not fully part of either, without either side slamming the door, remains to be seen.

- ¹ Ömer Taşpınar, phone interview with the author, 31 July 2008, Washington, D.C.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Michael Rubin, "Shifting Sides? The Problems of Neo-Ottomanism," *National Review Online*, 10 Aug 2004, <http://www.meforum.org/article/628>.
- ⁵ Ümit Enginsoy, "US says no need for Turk mediation on Iran," *Turkish Daily News*, 28 June 2006.
- ⁶ Ali Babacan, "The Ambassadors' Conference: Foreign Minister's Opening Statement," 15 July 2008, Ankara, Turkey, <http://www.turkishembassy.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=706>.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Gareth Jenkins, "Turks Receive a Geography Lesson as AKP Scrambles for Support in the UN," *The Jamestown Foundation*, 17 April 2008.
- ⁹ Ömer Taşpınar, phone interview with the author, 31 July 2008, Washington, D.C.
- ¹⁰ Frank Tachau, phone interview with the author, 1 August 2008, Washington, D.C.
- ¹¹ Stephen J. Flanagan and Samuel J. Brannen, "Turkey's Shifting Dynamics: Implications for U.S.-Turkey Relations," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 2008, http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/080606_turkeyshiftingdyn.pdf.
- ¹² Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Dilemma: Neo-Ottomanism v/s Kemalism" *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 30 June 2008, <http://www.carnegie-mec.org/NewsDetails.aspx?ID=829&MID=332&PID=321>.
- ¹³ Dexter Filkins, "Threats and Responses: Ankara; Turkish Deputies Refuse to Accept American Troops," *New York Times*, 2 March 2003.
- ¹⁴ Ali Babacan, Speech to Atlantic Council of the United States, 3 June 2008, Washington, D.C., <http://www.acus.org/about-news-Turkish-PM-speech.asp>.
- ¹⁵ Yigal Schleifer, "Turkey aims for clout as a regional mediator," *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 May 2008.
- ¹⁶ "Turkey not mediator in nuclear now," *Turkish Daily News*, 6 August 2008.
- ¹⁷ Çengiz Candar, "Turkey's Crucial Role in the Middle East," *Turkish Daily News*, 7 August 2008.
- ¹⁸ Taşpınar, "Turkey's Dilemma."
- ¹⁹ "Turkish MPs host Mid-East leaders," *BBC News*, 13 November 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Çengiz Aktar, "Turkey is back to peace making – but not at home," *Turkish Daily News*, 7 June 2008.
- ²² Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Peaceful Return to the Middle East," *Today's Zaman*, 26 May 2008.
- ²³ "The Israel-Syria Negotiations," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 May 2008, <http://www.mfa.gov>.
- ²⁴ Massoud A. Derhally, "Syria Says it Seeks Peace with Israel to Regain Land," *Bloomberg.com*, 13 August 2008, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=aazre4kDSRZc&refer=home>.
- ²⁵ "The Israel-Syria Negotiations," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 May 2008, <http://www.mfa.gov>.
- ²⁶ Tzipi Livni, "Statement by PM Olmert regarding negotiations with Syria, 21 May 2008," Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22 May 2008, <http://www.mfa.org>.
- ²⁷ Isabel Kershner, "Israel and Syria Hint at Progress on Golan Heights Deal," *New York Times*, 24 April 2008; Mark Lavie, "Officials: Talks between Israel, Syria Resume," *AP Online*, 15 June 2008.
- ²⁸ Nawara Mahfoud and Robert F. Worth, "Syrians See an Economic Side to Peace," *New York Times*, 29 July 2008.
- ²⁹ Janine Zacharia, "Could Peace Break Out for Israel and Syria?" *International Herald Tribune*, 29 July 2008.
- ³⁰ Massoud A. Derhally, "Syria Says it Seeks Peace with Israel to Regain Land," *Bloomberg.com*, 13 August 2008.
- ³¹ Ali Babacan, Speech to Atlantic Council of the United States, 3 June 2008.
- ³² Barçın Yinanç, "Turkey's role between Iran and the US," *Turkish Daily News*, 19 July 2008.
- ³³ Emile el-Hokayen and Ömer Taşpınar, "Syria Loves Ankara but Will the Relationship Last?" *The Daily Star (Beirut)*, 19 April 2005, www.brookings.edu.
- ³⁴ "Warm welcome for Assad's Turkey trip," *BBC NEWS*, 6 January 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>.
- ³⁵ Emile el-Hokayen and Ömer Taşpınar, "Syria Loves Ankara but Will the Relationship Last?" *The Daily Star (Beirut)*, 19 April 2005, www.brookings.edu.
- ³⁶ Brock Dahl and Danielle Slutzkky, "Timeline of Turkish-Israeli Relations, 1949-2006," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/documents/44edf1a5d337f.pdf>.
- ³⁷ Ibid.; "Turkey awaits two-day visit by Iran president," *AFP*, 12 August 2008.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Kerim Balcı, "Proactive diplomacy promotes Turkey," *Today's Zaman*, 6 August 2008.
- ⁴⁰ Ömer Taşpınar, phone interview with the author, 31 July 2008, Washington, D.C.
- ⁴¹ Servet Yanatma, "Iran mediation prospects gain momentum with key visits," *Today's Zaman*, 17 July 2008.
- ⁴² Çengiz Candar, "Turkey's Crucial Role in The Middle East," *Turkish Daily News*, 7 August 2008.
- ⁴³ "Keeping an eye on the neighborhood," *Turkish Daily News*, 17 July 2008.

- ⁴⁴ Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks with Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini After Their Meeting, 29 July 2008, Washington, D.C. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/07/107531.htm>.
- ⁴⁵ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks with Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan," U.S. Department of State, 5 June 2008, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/06/105690.htm>.
- ⁴⁶ Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. envoy to join meeting on Iran's nuclear program," *International Herald Tribune*, 16 July 2008.
- ⁴⁷ Ümit Enginsoy, "US says no need for Turk mediation on Iran," *Turkish Daily News*, 28 June 2006.
- ⁴⁸ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks with Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan," U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., 5 June 2008, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/06/105690.htm>.
- ⁴⁹ "Ahmadinejad says Turkey engaged in 'friendly effort'" *Turkish Daily News*, 15 August 2008.
- ⁵⁰ "Iranian leader on the way to Turkey amid criticism," *Turkish Daily News*, 13 August 2008.
- ⁵¹ "Israel protests Turkey over planned Iranian president Ahmadinejad's visit," *Hurriyet English*, 8 August 2008.
- ⁵² Tulin Daloğlu, "Turkey's Regional Influence," *The Washington Times*, 12 August 2008.
- ⁵³ "Iran, Turkey Fail To Sign Energy Deals," *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 16 August 2008, www.turkishweekly.net.
- ⁵⁴ Robin Wright, "US on the Outside in Peace Efforts," *Washington Post*, 22 May 2008.
- ⁵⁵ "Headscarf ignites Iran-Turkey row," *BBC News*, 11 May 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>.
- ⁵⁶ Soner Çağaptay, "Turkey bows to the dark side," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 August 2008.
- ⁵⁷ David Ignatius, "Going Their Own Way in the Mideast," *Washington Post*, 1 June 2008.
- ⁵⁸ Noah Feldman, "Buildup to the Next War," *New York Times*, 8 August 2008.
- ⁵⁹ "Press Briefing by Dana Perino and OMB Director Jim Nussle," 21 May 2008, Washington, D.C., <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/05/20080521-10.html>.
- ⁶⁰ David Ignatius, "Going Their Own Way in the Mideast," *Washington Post*, 1 June 2008.
- ⁶¹ Sam F. Ghattas, "Turkish prime minister discusses Syria-Israel peace," *AP Online*, 26 April 2008.
- ⁶² Robin Wright, "U.S. on the Outside in Peace Efforts," *Washington Post*, 22 May 2008.
- ⁶³ Fareed Zakaria terms this phenomenon broadly as "the rise of the rest," in "What Bush Got Right," *Newsweek*, 18 & 25 August 2008, p. 25.
- ⁶⁴ Bernard Avishai and Reza Aslan, "An Israeli Strike on Iran, a Plan that Just Doesn't Fly," *Washington Post*, 10 August 2008.
- ⁶⁵ Stephen J. Flanagan and Samuel J. Brannen, "Turkey's Shifting Dynamics: Implications for U.S.-Turkey Relations," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 2008.
- ⁶⁶ Robin Wright, "U.S. on the Outside in Peace Efforts," *Washington Post*, 22 May 2008.
- ⁶⁷ "Assad: Next round of Syria-Israel talks will be 'decisive,'" *Ha'aretz*, 24 August 2008.
- ⁶⁸ Bernard Avishai and Reza Aslan, "An Israeli Strike on Iran, a Plan that Just Doesn't Fly," *Washington Post*, 10 August 2008.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ⁷⁰ Sam F. Ghattas, "Syria, Iran warm to Russia as US tensions grow," *AP Online*, 26 August 2008.
- ⁷¹ Stephen J. Flanagan and Samuel J. Brannen, "Turkey's Shifting Dynamics: Implications for U.S.-Turkey Relations," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 2008.