

Steven A. Cook

**Turkish Relations
with the Middle East**



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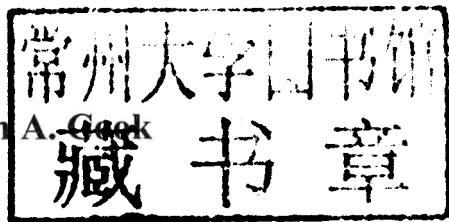
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Introduction

“Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir.”

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, June 12, 2011.

The Turkish prime minister's statement following his general election victory the previous day reflects the way in which Ankara has, over the course of the last decade, sought to carve out a new and influential role in the Middle East. Indeed, a hallmark of Turkey's foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) – which came to power in November 2002 and was re-elected by a wide margin in 2007 and again in 2011 – has been the return of Turkey to the Middle East. The policy has been broadly successful as Ankara upgraded its relation with Damascus, Tripoli, Tehran, served as a problem solver in Lebanon, worked vigorously to broker talks between Israel and Syria, and played a part in forging a rapprochement between the Saudis and the Syrians. Most visibly, the AKP, in particular Prime Minister Erdoğan, has taken a tough stand on Israeli policy in the Gaza Strip both before and after Israel's 2005 unilateral withdrawal from the area. This has won Erdoğan and Turkey

plaudits among average Arabs who long believed that their rulers had surrendered leadership on the Palestinian issue.

Although in the abstract it seems entirely appropriate for Turkey to want to broaden and deepen its relations with its neighbors and other countries to the south and east, the shift in policy was so dramatic that it led both Western and some Turkish observers to question whether Turkey was shifting away from its traditional Western foreign policy posture. The fact that the AKP's lineage can be traced back to the founding of Turkey's Islamist movement in the late 1960s under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan only accentuated concerns about Ankara's efforts to forge a new path in the Middle East. After all, Turkey had long been a tepid and cautious observer of Middle Eastern politics, devoting most of its diplomatic energy on the institutionalization of relations with Europe and the United States. This Western orientation, especially Ankara's NATO membership, was prior to the rise of the AKP a source of mistrust with which the Arab world tended to view Turkey. More profoundly, the combination of the Ottoman colonial legacy in the Middle East and Kemalism's official policy of *laiklik* (secularism), which seemed to many in the Middle East as irreligious, sowed an unarticulated but unmistakable divide between Turkey and the Arab world. Finally, the insular quality of Turkish politics after WWI resulted in a foreign policy that traditionally sought to avoid entangling Ankara in the politics, rivalries and conflicts of the Middle East.

There were, of course, exceptions to Turkey's relative isolation from the Middle East. Turgut Özal's tenure as prime minister

and then president between 1983 and his death a decade later was a period of Turkish foreign policy activism. Through a more expansive regional policy, Özal sought simultaneously to expand Ankara's influence among Arab states (along with the broader Muslim world); resolve Turkey's own pressing problems with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which found shelter in Arab countries; and lead Turkey to greater prosperity. This included everything from recognizing the 1988 Palestinian declaration of independence to undertaking military operations against Iraq and expanding Ankara's economic links to the Gulf states.¹ In the mid-1990s, Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan – the leader of Turkey's first experience with Islamist led government – sought closer ties with both the Arab world and the wider Muslim world. Erbakan, who was deeply suspicious of Europe and the Turkish establishment's efforts to draw closer to and eventually join the European Union (EU), sought an alternative for Turkey in greater Muslim solidarity. Toward that end, the Refah-led government sought to improve ties with Libya, Iran and Nigeria. No doubt, there were commercial concerns that drove Erbakan's interest, but there was also a clear ideological purpose in the policy. Erbakan's tenure ended within a year of his arrival at the prime ministry when the Turkish General Staff orchestrated the fall of his government. By the time Erbakan left office in June 1997, he had little to show for his outreach to the Muslim world. A few years later, Turkey's foreign minister, Ismail Cem, launched an initiative to improve Ankara's relations with the Arab states. Cem's efforts never developed momentum primarily over Turkey's burgeoning security relationship with Israel.

Indeed, during the 1990s, it was Israel, not the Arab world that became a focal point of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. The Turks and Israelis established diplomatic relations in 1950 at the Legation level, which does not include an ambassador. Despite official ties, Ankara diligently kept the Israelis at a distance in the ensuing decades. This was largely a function of the fact that despite official ties with Israel, Turkish public sentiment was generally sympathetic to the Palestinian cause as well as an official desire to avoid getting involved in a conflict that could complicate its relations with the West. During the military dictatorship in Turkey from 1980–1983, relations between Turkey and Israel deteriorated considerably.² Less than a decade after the generals handed the country back to civilians, Ankara and Tel Aviv upgraded ties. Israel's first ambassador to Turkey, Uri Gordon, took up his post in 1990. Gordon's counterpart, Ekrem Güvendiren took up residence in Tel Aviv two years later. Relations between Israelis and Turks subsequently flowered.

The highpoint in Turkey–Israel ties came in February 1996 when the Turkish General Staff announced that it had struck a strategic cooperation agreement with the Israel Defense Forces. The initial five-year agreement included reciprocal training exercises, which brought Israeli pilots to Turkey to train four times a year (for a week at a time) to an airbase near Konya and granted Turkish pilots access to Israel's Nevatim airfield near Beersheva for four weeks during the year. Also part of the agreement were provisions for joint Israeli, Turkish, and US search-and-rescue operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. There was also an intelligence component to the agreement,

which gave Turks access to Israeli satellite imagery and information relevant to Turkish security from Mossad. The agreement was not, however, as far ranging and threatening to the Arab world as its critics at the time suggested. For example, when Israeli pilots trained over central Anatolia, they did so without Turkish pilots, without weapons, and without all the sophisticated electronics that Israeli warplanes would normally have on board. Moreover, there were specific safeguards preventing forces being hosted in either Israel or Turkey from taking part in hostilities against a third country.³ Still, military-to-military ties made strategic sense for both countries. After all, Israelis and Turks were outsiders in a region that they regarded as either explicitly or implicitly hostile. In particular, the Turkish and Israeli military establishments perceived Damascus and Tehran to be primary threats to their respective security. Moreover, both security establishments believed they had much to gain in the area of counter-terrorism, where the Turks were battling the Kurdistan Workers Party and Israel was focused on the challenge from Hamas. Indeed, when it came to counter-terrorism the restrictions built into the strategic cooperation agreement were subject to a matter of interpretation. When the Turkish armed forces undertook a brief military incursion into northern Iraq in the spring and fall of 1997, the operation not only looked suspiciously like Israel's periodic thrusts into southern Lebanon, but there were rumors that remain unconfirmed that Israeli military advisors were on hand to observe the mission.

In addition or perhaps a component of the security relationship was a robust trade relationship. Even before the 1996 Free Trade

Agreement between the two countries, Israel had become a major supplier of weapons-systems to the Turkish armed forces. This was primarily a result of US military trade embargoes on Turkey that reflected Washington's concerns with the way Ankara was prosecuting its war with the separatist Kurdistan Worker Party that began in 1984. The Israelis supplied the Turks with upgrades of tanks and fighter aircraft, missiles and sophisticated electronic systems. In 2002, the Turkish Ministry of National Defense signed a contract with Israeli Military Industries to upgrade 170 M60 tanks for US\$688 million. Yet the direction of trade was not all in one direction. Israel's imports from Turkey tripled between the mid-1990s and 2003, which was a result of the progressive reduction of trade barriers between the two countries. Tourism also became a huge market for Turkish tour operators as Israelis poured into Turkey in large numbers. That market has largely dried up, however, as bilateral relations between Turkey and Israel have deteriorated markedly in recent years over Israel's policies toward the Gaza Strip.

There was also an undeniable diplomatic and political dynamic driving Turkey-Israel relations throughout the 1990s. A primary goal of Israeli foreign policy has long been breaking out of the diplomatic isolation resulting from the Arab-Israeli conflict. For Jerusalem, upgrading diplomatic relations with a large, predominantly Muslim country that is adjacent to the Middle East was a major diplomatic achievement. The fact that the subsequent development of bilateral military ties placed Israel's primary regional antagonists on the defensive further enhanced Turkey's value as a strategic partner. For the Turks, the political and diplomatic benefits of alignment with Israel lay primarily in

Washington. Outside the US foreign policy establishment, Ankara does not have a natural constituency in Washington. The Turkish-American community is relatively small, disparate, and well assimilated. While there are large concentrations of Turkish Americans in electorally important states such as New Jersey, Illinois, and Texas, they are not present in large enough numbers to make their presence felt in any kind of politically decisive way. Indeed, the number of Greek- and Armenian-Americans always outstripped the Turkish-American population. The Turks had long understood that good relations with Israel came the goodwill of pro-Israel groups in the United States that could be useful in fending off Greek- and Armenian-American advocacy efforts that were perceived to be inimical to Turkey. By all measures, the strategy worked. In a profound irony given Jewish history, pro-Israel groups routinely helped to shield Turkey from Congressional efforts to characterize the mass killings of Armenians in April 1915 as a genocide.

By any measure, the relationship between Turkey and Israel benefitted both countries militarily, economically and diplomatically. Yet the era of strategic coordination was relatively brief and from the perspective of many Turks, largely unnatural. This is not to suggest that Turks opposed relations with Israel in the way that Egyptians or Jordanians contest the legitimacy of their governments' diplomatic ties with Jerusalem, but that Turkish-Israeli ties in the 1990s were in many ways a manifestation of the Turkish military's hegemony at that moment. Civilian leaders (some more grudgingly than others) went along because they had no choice and the business community saw opportunities in Israel, especially tourism.

Moreover, lost in accounts of relations in the late 1990s and early 2000s were the sometimes difficult relations between Ankara and Jerusalem. Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit – a left-leaning nationalist who served from 1999–2002 – never embraced the relationship and called Israel’s policies in the Gaza Strip “state-sponsored terrorism.” Still, Ecevit never did anything materially to alter Turkish-Israeli ties. That would eventually come after the rise of the Justice and Development Party in 2002 and, like the establishment of the strategic relationship, have much to do with domestic political calculations.

The Rise of Turkey in the Middle East

At the May 2001 conference of the Fazilet party, the successor to the banned Refah party, young party activists under the leadership of the former mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and one of Necmettin Erbakan’s ministers of state, Abdullah Gül, did something that was relatively unheard of in Turkish politics. They defied the leaders of their party, the elders of Turkey’s Islamist movement, and broke from the party, promising a new political party that was all at once dynamic, reformist, pragmatic and technocratic that could lead Turkey to a new, more democratic future. It was at that moment that the Justice and Development Party – known universally by its Turkish acronym AKP – was born, although the official date of the party’s founding is August 2001. At the time, few Turkish or Western analysts gave AKP much of a chance. Although Erdoğan had been an effective mayor of Istanbul and Gül was a high-profile member of Erbakan’s foreign policy team, they had

just precipitated an historic schism within Turkey's Islamist movement. Moreover, the political environment to launch a new party of Islamist patrimony did not seem propitious. In 1997, the Turkish General Staff had run Erbakan and Refah from power through National Security Council Decision no. 406, known colloquially as the "28th of February Process," which set out 18 "recommendations" – in the context of Turkish politics, they were more akin to directives – for ensuring the secular and republican political order.⁴ Refah's successor, Fazilet, was already under pressure from the state prosecutor for being an alleged "center of anti-secular activities" and the military under chief-of-staff, General Huseyin Kivrikoğlu, was vowing to ensure the implementation of the 28th of February Process for "1,000 years."⁵ Erdoğan had been arrested and imprisoned in 1998 for repeating a poem that invokes "mosques as our helmets and minarets as our bayonets," which Turkey's secular establishment interpreted as an Islamist call to arms. The irony of the episode was that the poem's author was Ziya Gökalp—a central literary figure in republican Turkey's nationalist pantheon who could hardly be considered an Islamist firebrand.

Despite doubts among observers, Erdoğan and Gül were good to their word. They brought a large number of Fazilet activists and constituents with them, leaving a moribund old guard behind; struck a reformist posture; and when time came for the 2002 national elections, drafted a party platform that was virtually indistinguishable from what Turkey's right of center parties had produced over the years. Critics charged that the leaders of the new party were engaged in dissimulation in an effort to advance the Islamization of Turkish politics and society. Yet many Turks,

unhappy over a painful economic crisis that began in late 2000 and after a decade of unstable ruling coalitions, gave the Justice and Development Party the benefit of the doubt. In the November 2002 parliamentary elections, 34.31 percent of Turkish voters who went to the polls cast their ballots for AKP, giving the new party 363 seats in the Grand National Assembly. Although the Turkish General Staff viewed the party with suspicion, under chief-of-staff, Hilmi Özkök, the military preferred to strike an informal gentlemen's agreement with AKP's leadership not to destabilize the political arena. In practice this meant that AKP would avoid hot-button issues that were part of Turkey's secularist-Islamist divide, notably the ban on women donning the *hicab* (hijab) at public universities and government facilities, such as ministries (but not, for example, the post office). There were, of course, moments of tension during the early period of AKP's rule, especially when the parliament sought to allow graduates of *imam-hatip* schools – educational institutions at the secondary level that train mosque prayer leaders and preachers – access to positions in the state bureaucracy. Overall, however, the AKP's first term was marked by pragmatism at home and abroad.

Erdoğan and Gül's (who was AKP's first prime minister due to a ban on Erdoğan for his arrest) initial focus was on the European Union (EU) and readying Turkey for membership negotiations. Unlike the Islamist Old Guard that was deeply suspicious of Europe and its willingness to permit overwhelmingly Muslim Turkey to join the EU, the leaders of the AKP staked their political legacy on moving forward with Ankara's bid to become a member of Europe's exclusive club.

This was a function of the party's desire to forge a political system that was more liberal and as a result, tolerant of freedom of speech and expression as opposed to Turkey's prevailing system of laicism in which the state controlled religion in order to keep it from entering the public square. Yet in order to begin the EU accession process Turkey needed a formal invitation to begin membership negotiations, which hinged on Ankara's compliance with what is known as the Copenhagen criteria. These benchmarks required Turkey to undertake a range of political and economic reforms that including ensuring the rule of law, human and minority rights, the "stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy" and a market economy as first steps toward harmonizing the country with European regulations and norms.⁶ Over the course of 2003 and 2004, the Justice and Development Party pushed seven constitutional reform packages through the Grand National Assembly. The institutional changes that these reforms promised met the Copenhagen criteria and in its October 2004 progress report on Turkey, the EU commission recommended that Brussels commence formal accession negotiations with Ankara.

At the same time that the AKP was actively pursuing EU-related reforms, the Turkish government began pursuing a multi-dimensional foreign policy that included renewed relations with Russia, the Caucasus, and, in particular, the Middle East. This outreach came in tandem with renewed Arab interest in Turkey and Turkish politics, which was primarily a result of AKP's electoral success. The Justice and Development Party's rise intrigued political activists in the Arab world who wondered whether there were any lessons to be learned from Turkish