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- 15 SHIFTING TURKEY: ANKARA'S NEW DYNAMICS UNDER  
THE AKP GOVERNMENT  
*Dario D'Urso*



### Portuguese Journal of International Affairs

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**Articles in journals:** Paulo Gorjão, "Japan's Foreign Policy and East Timor, 1975-2002" (*Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, No. 5, September/October 2002), pp. 754-771.

**Articles in newspapers:** Paulo Gorjão, "UN needs coherent strategy to exit from East Timor" (*Jakarta Post*, 19 May 2004), p. 25.

5. Diagrams and tables should be avoided, or kept to a minimum.

# Shifting Turkey: Ankara's new dynamics under the AKP government

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One of the most striking geopolitical events the world has witnessed in the last decade is the repositioning of Turkey in the global arena. Rarely in contemporary history have a government and a political party managed to influence the internal and the external long-term paradigms of a country so heavily. The changes Turkey has undergone since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in 2002 are today commonly depicted as a 'shift of axis': from the eastern outpost of the Euro-Atlantic world during and immediately after the Cold War to the centre of a series of interests increasingly aimed towards the Islamic Middle East and other former territories of the Ottoman Empire. The reassessment of the Turkish role in the world and the erosion of the internal pillars on which the Kemalist republic was founded nearly one century ago, have been a cause for concern for scholars and governments: the end of the strategic alliance between Turkey and Israel and the increasing closeness with the Iranian and Syrian regimes made many commentators state that 'Turkey was lost', or that Ankara may follow the path taken by Iran in 1979. What may actually be useful to understand is how permanent the sweeping and increasingly radical changes brought on by the AKP in its eight years at the helm of Turkey might be: are we really witnessing the rise of a new geopolitical actor, increasingly turning its back on the West while trying to assert its role in the Middle East and beyond through an Islamist agenda? Is a 'neo-Ottoman' Turkey here to stay? How much of that might survive a change in government? In order to find appropriate answers, this article will go through the latest developments in the political life of Turkey by 1) taking into account the new, proactive foreign policy pursued by the AKP government and 2) considering how the Turkish internal scene has been effected by the struggle between the ruling party and the pillars of secularism, namely the army, the media and the judiciary. Furthermore, the article will also take into account how energy plays an essential role in defining Turkey's new foreign aspirations, specially vis-à-vis Russia. The results of this overview will provide the basis for elaborating a possible scenario on the future role of Ankara, both internally and externally, and its relationship with the Western world.

## Turkish foreign politics under the AKP

The most evident sign of a change of pattern in Turkey's politics emerges from the analysis of the foreign politics pursued by the AKP government. During its first term in office (2002–2007) the policy followed by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul was essentially in line with the Euro-Atlantic pillars of the Kemalist republic. In that phase, the stated goal of membership in the European Union seemed to have been genuinely followed by the AKP. The controversy surrounding the issue of opening Turkish ports to Greek Cypriot vessels was among the factors that led to an increasing coolness in the EU-Ankara relationship.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, renewed calls for a 'special relationship' – rather than full membership – voiced by the centre-right governments of Nicolas Sarkozy in France and Angela Merkel in Germany did not help either. Transatlantic relations were also tested just a few months after the AKP formed its first government (led by Abdullah Gul), when the Turkish Parliament failed to pass a resolution allowing US troops to use Turkish soil in their operations against Iraq. This event marked the beginning of a difficult period in the relationship between Ankara and Washington, which lasted throughout both George W. Bush's terms as President. In a context where Turkish Euro-Atlantic foundations started losing appeal in the eyes of the AKP government, major shifts in Ankara's foreign politics were about to appear. The 2007 elections, which gave Erdogan an almost absolute majority in parliament (47% against the 34% gained in 2002), led to an increasingly 'neighborhood-oriented' foreign policy: Ankara would concentrate and strengthen its external projection – both political and economic – in the areas surrounding its borders: the Balkans, the Caucasus, and above all the Middle East. The formal recognition of such a 'shift' took place in 2009, when after a government reshuffle, Ahmet Davutoglu – Erdogan's long-time chief foreign policy advisor – became the new Foreign Minister. Davutoglu, a professor of international relations before entering into politics, provided the theoretical foundations for the AKP foreign agenda. In his most famous essay, 'Strategic Depth – The International Position of Turkey', Davutoglu outlines the new rules of the game for Ankara's external projection. In his book, which remains untranslated into English, the current foreign minister is a vocal advocate of an 'active' foreign policy, opposite the role Turkey was relegated to during the Cold War. The core of Davutoglu's vision is the 'zero problems with neighbors' policy,<sup>2</sup> which should be pursued by exerting the maximum level of Turkey's soft power in the region, thus decreasing the muscular role played by the military in shaping Turkish foreign policy since the founding of the Kemalist republic. The change of perspective brought by Erdogan, Gul and Davutoglu – whose personal background is rooted in central Anatolia, a more conservative and religious region of Turkey compared to the coast and Istanbul – has often been labeled, specially by its detractors, as 'neo-Ottomanism'.<sup>3</sup> The implication is immediately clear: the AKP government is pursuing an active promotion of Turkey's strategic interests in the region of its former empire, emphasizing the role of

political Islam in its external projection, neglecting Western aspirations and establishing new partnerships with other former imperial powers, such as Russia and Iran. Davutoglu has never seemed fond of such a label, always denying any 'imperial' ambition behind AKP's activism in Ankara's foreign policy, eventually preferring the term 'Pax Ottomana',<sup>4</sup> implying that Turkey is a privileged mediator in many of the regional conflicts around its borders. Actually, the AKP government has tried hard to build the image of Turkey as an honest broker in its neighborhood. Let us just recall some episodes of this flush of activism: Ankara mediated between Syria and Israel, until Operation Cast Lead against Hamas-run Gaza made the talks collapse; Erdogan and Davutoglu conducted an active shuttle diplomacy during the brief war between Russia and Georgia in 2008, going so far as proposing the establishment of a regional conflict-management mechanism dubbed 'Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform', a bold idea mostly conceived as a self-promotion tool; the Foreign Minister has also actively attempted to alleviate recurring tension in the Balkans by promoting a series of meetings among Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia. The 'zero problem' policy was also pursued by engaging in the problematic relations Turkey has with several of its neighbors, although in many cases such a strategy was not simply the result of the AKP government's efforts: reconciliation with Syria was mostly due to the end of Damascus's support for the outlawed Party of Kurdistan Workers (PKK);<sup>5</sup> cooperation with Iraq was fostered by the regime change operated by the United States; and the closeness with Russia is mostly dictated by Turkey's will to become the main hub for Russian gas and oil to the West. When Ankara tried the path of reconciliation with Armenia, the process eventually stalled among a web of regional (Ankara's special relation with Yerevan's arch-enemy, Azerbaijan, and the frozen conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh) and historical implications (the thorny issue of recognizing the Armenian Genocide). Apart from the course of action inaugurated with Russia, it is in the Middle East that this break in Turkish foreign policy appears to be more significant and to a certain extent problematic, for it is in that region that the 'zero problems with neighbors' policy has proven to be rather selective.<sup>6</sup>

The alliance between Turkey and Israel seemed as one of the most stable factors in the highly volatile Middle East. When Ankara's role as eastern outpost of the Atlantic Alliance against the Soviet Union became unnecessary with the end of the Cold War, the strategic axis with Jerusalem provided a more regional perspective still anchored in Western values. The partnership between Turkey and Israel was a direct expression of the prominent role the military used to have in shaping Ankara's foreign policy priorities. While sharing some common enemies, such as Syria, Iraq and to a certain extent Iran, Israel provided advanced military hardware through conspicuous contracts, as well as intelligence material to help Turkey fight Kurdish terrorism. At the same time, Ankara was seen by the Jewish State as the only real ally in the Muslim Middle East. The pattern of such an alliance was inherited by the AKP government, which actually kept it: one of its most important mediation roles – a matter of pride for Erdogan – was embodied by the

indirect talks he and Davutoglu were brokering between the Israeli government and Syria. The turning point in Turkish-Israeli relations was 'Operation Cast Lead', which Israeli armed forces launched against the Hamas-run Gaza Strip in December 2008. Erdogan was among the most vibrant critics of such a military attack; he personally felt betrayed by then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, because the attack was actually launched just a few days after a bilateral meeting during which, according to the Turkish Premier, no word was said about the imminent strikes on the Palestinians. 'Operation Cast Lead' marked the beginning of an era of mutual distrust and retaliations which, up to now and notwithstanding the 'doves' on both sides, had a strategic impact on the relation itself, turning two strong allies into two uneasy neighbors. The series of episodes which followed the Gaza attacks clearly showed a turn of tide between Ankara and Jerusalem. On one hand, a series of 'PR incidents' undermined mutual trust between the two countries: the quarrel between Erdogan and Israeli President Shimon Peres at Davos in January 2009, the TV series aired by a Turkish public broadcaster depicting Israeli soldiers as ruthless killers, or the humiliating treatment once given to the Turkish ambassador by the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister were all signs of decaying confidence.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the AKP government operated a series of more substantial changes in Turkish projection in the Middle East, namely by quickly fostering a strong relationship with countries such as Syria, Iraq and Iran, to the detriment of Israeli sense of security. The Turkish decision in October 2009 to exclude Israel from the annual air exercise 'Anatolian Eagle' and to subsequently invite Damascus to hold a joint air drill was a strong sign of this. The increasing closeness between Erdogan and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, at a time when Teheran is widely seen as a pariah state because of its controversial nuclear program, was also cause for increasing concern for the Israeli government. While trying to play the role of the only open channel left between Iran and the West, by pursuing an almost tireless shuttle diplomacy with Teheran, Erdogan decided to stand by the Iranian President's side, calling him a 'friend' and insisting on the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>8</sup> This defense was doubled by a strong accusation of hypocrisy directed towards Israel: the argument of the temperamental Turkish Prime Minister was that a state such as Israel, which has already developed a military nuclear program (one of the worst kept secrets in the Middle East), should have no right to blame another country for trying to do the same. Erdogan also stressed on many occasions that Israel, unlike Iran, never signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The mounting closeness to an Iran which might be on the road to become a nuclear power surprised many, not only in Israel and in the United States but in Turkey as well. A number of domestic commentators argued that a nuclear Iran might be a potential threat also for Turkey: the Islamist orientation of the AKP should not be taken as the only explanation for this behavior, which widened the distance between Turkey and much of the Western world. Insistence on reaching a diplomatic solution – which, although obtained also through Brazilian mediation, was not enough to dissipate Western concerns – might

also be explained by two factors: increasing the regional stand of Ankara, specially in the Muslim world, as the only country which managed to face Western pressure against Iran and, more pragmatically, seeking a stronger energy partnership with Teheran in the ongoing attempt to turn Ankara into the energy hub of Europe.

A central argument on which Turkey has partially built its new role as a rising Middle Eastern power is the defense of the Palestinian cause. Although, more than addressing the whole issue, Ankara's attention has been specially directed towards the Gaza Strip and its Hamas government, suffering from the restriction Israel has imposed following Operation Cast Lead. The accusation towards the Israeli government for the treatment reserved to Palestinians living in Gaza has been a constant since relations soured in late 2008. The last – and most striking – example of such an attitude has been the so called 'flotilla incident' of May 2010. The Turkish non-governmental organization which organized the humanitarian flotilla towards Gaza with the tacit support of the AKP has been accused of enjoying links with several radical Islamist organizations to which it allegedly channeled aid and money. The death of nine Turkish nationals during the raid operated by the Israeli commando on the Mavi Marmara, the main ship in the humanitarian flotilla, and the following exchange of accusations marked the lowest point in Turkish-Israeli relations.<sup>9</sup>

It is undeniable that the new course of Turkish foreign policy is also based on a certain degree of 'Islamic solidarity', almost an attempt – a quite successful one too, if one considers the popularity Erdogan enjoys in Arab streets – to regain the trust of those Arab countries that were once part of the Ottoman empire and whose relations with Turkey have until now been quite problematic. But the common religious factor is not the only drive for the AKP foreign policy in the Middle East and in the Muslim world. One of the main reasons for the prior strong link between Israel and Turkey was the distrust both countries felt for their Arab neighbors, who might constitute a serious potential threat. Nowadays, many of these threats do not exist anymore: Syria has abandoned its pro-PKK stance and it is gradually returning to the international community; a very weak Iraq has become a central playground for the Turkish struggle against Kurdish terrorism, while at the same time Ankara became an essential partner to the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government, with an eye on its important oil and gas resources; and Iran might also be essential in the making of Turkey's energy strategy. Because of all this, Ankara might not need Israel as it used to in the past: an alliance which, on the internal front, was becoming more difficult to defend in the eyes of the most conservative and religious Turkish electorate which is the consensus basis for the AKP. On the other hand, Turkey increasingly behaves as the new Sunni regional power; the void left by Egypt and Saudi Arabia – whose regional projection is highly undermined by the ailing conditions of their policymakers (Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has turned 82 and veteran Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al Faisal allegedly suffers from Parkinson) seemed to have been filled by Ankara's new proactive role in the region. Thanks to his intransigent position on

the Gaza issue, Erdogan has won the hearts and minds of Arabs all over the Middle East (some commentators have even labeled him the 'new Nasser'), something that is not necessarily appreciated by Arab governments. Nevertheless, Turkish officials vehemently rebuke any accusation of shift of axis from West to East and South at the detriment of a former ally such as Israel. Rather than a shift, Erdogan and Davutoglu prefer to speak of a rebalancing of Turkey's foreign priorities: Ankara has 'rediscovered' its long-abandoned Eastern aspirations, put aside for almost a century after the demise of the Ottoman empire and the rise of the Kemalist republic pushed Turkey to anchor itself to the West. The delays on the European integration path, which should be equally shared between Ankara and Brussels, serve as a perfect reason to look East, although membership in the EU allegedly remains one of the core aims of the current Turkish government. Turkey's repositioning towards the East is also an economy-driven choice: the financial crisis in the West has forced Turkish exporters to look more and more at new markets, not as badly hit as those in Europe and the United States. A natural choice was therefore looking to the Middle East. Exports towards Arab countries have grown substantially in recent years, while those towards Europe have begun to shrink. Although the former could not substitute the latter as the first choice for Turkish entrepreneurs, Turkish economic penetration in the Middle East is a proven trend, one that also requires, in the eyes of Ankara's policy makers, a stronger political commitment. The recent proposal signed by the Foreign Ministers of Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria at the recent Turkish-Arab Business Forum aimed at creating a free trade area among these countries might sound more as a propaganda move right now, but it certainly proves a well-established trend in Ankara's trade policy.<sup>10</sup>

As it emerges from the analysis, the strong impact that the AKP is having on the reshaping of Ankara's foreign policy orientations results from a mix of causes: 1) a strong ideological basis of the current Turkish government, provided by an increasingly stricter political interpretation of Islam; 2) new geopolitical realities in the Middle East, which allowed for a more friendly environment to emerge; 3) the lack of effective leadership among Sunni nations; and 4) an economic drive towards Arab states. This reorientation came at the expense of a decade-long ally such as Israel. It remains to be seen if thanks to its new role Turkey might actually bring positive changes to the problematic Middle Eastern dynamics – specially concerning the Iranian question – or if on the contrary the current government might finally prove to be a radicalizing factor in an already difficult scenario.

## Turkey as an energy hub

Further evidence of Ankara's pragmatic approach to foreign politics emerged from the analysis of the AKP government's attempts to turn Turkey into a strategic energy hub. In the current competition over bringing oil and gas resources from East to West, Ankara seems fully prepared to exploit its geographical position as a 'bridge'. The main issue



at stake is the implementation of two of the most important projects aimed at coping with Europe's energy security: the EU-backed Nabucco gas pipeline and its Russian rival, the South Stream project. Both projects are entrenched with political meaning: while Nabucco's aim is to guarantee a flow of gas to Europe bypassing Russia in order to reduce this country's leverage as main energy supplier, Gazprom's South Stream wants to reinforce this relationship by avoiding unstable transit countries such as Ukraine. The idea for South Stream was developed in the aftermath of the 2005-2006 gas crisis, at a time when political relations between Kiev and Moscow hit the lowest point in history. In this context, Turkey appears as a crucial element: although the Turkish national gas monopoly company – Botas – is a founding member of the Nabucco consortium, the political and technical uncertainties related to the European project (specially the lack of commitment from potential supply countries) made Turkey flirt more and more with the idea of becoming part of South Stream as well. In fact, Turkey consented to Russian use of its territorial waters in the Black Sea to lay down the underwater portion of the pipe.<sup>11</sup> The growing closeness between Ankara and Moscow, driven by this and other energy projects, shows to what extent pragmatism plays a role in the new Turkish foreign politics. At the moment, Turkey is a crucial element in both competing projects, and it has already proven to be able to play its role quite ruthlessly, specially when it comes to EU-backed projects. Ankara has often conditioned its participation in the Nabucco pipeline on certain requirements being met, such as the possibility to use part of the gas that would flow through its territory for reselling. In doing this, the country has on some occasions 'blackmailed' Brussels by pushing for the opening of further membership chapters and for an advantageous solution to the Cyprus issue. At the same time, Ankara is strategically important to the realization of the project, and not just because a long portion of the pipeline crosses its territory; Turkey's relationship with longtime ally Azerbaijan might prove crucial to ensure a flow of Caspian gas to Nabucco. Until now, Turkey has managed to play its cards well in the energy sphere by following a pragmatic interpretation of its national interests and setting the pace for other European countries willing to participate in both projects. The risk of such an ambitious energy policy, for Europe as well as Russia, is that Ankara might just turn out to be the next Ukraine: a country too heavily responsible for the energy security of both suppliers and users.

## **The domestic scenario**

If the changes brought by the AKP in the external projection of Turkey are quite remarkable, those introduced in the Turkish internal political and social scene are no less significant. The AKP itself is a direct challenge to the main pillars on which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the Turkish republic in 1923. Erdogan's party is just the most recent incarnation of political Islam in Turkey: since the publication of *Milli Görüş* (National View), its first

manifesto by Ecmettin Erbakan, Islamism has tried to express itself in Turkish politics by creating several political parties, which were disbanded one after the other by the Constitutional Court on the grounds of anti-secular activities: from the National Order Party to the National Salvation Party in the 1970s, to the Welfare Party, whose leader – Erbakan – actually ruled in a coalition government from 1996 to 1997 before being prompted to step down by the military in the first ‘postmodern coup’, and the Virtue Party in the 1990s; the AKP was formed by the reformist faction of the Virtue Party just a few months after the latter was disbanded by the Constitutional Court. In the long tradition of political Islam in Turkey, the AKP proved to be the most successful, having learned from the fate of its predecessors. Always denying an Islamist agenda, but rather portraying itself as the Muslim equivalent of a conservative Christian-Democratic party, the AKP electoral victory in 2002 was hailed as proof of increasing liberalism in a country where the military always had the last word in politics. The AKP push for liberalization was indeed going in the same direction the EU hoped Turkey would go: limiting the role of the ‘guardians’ of the secular republic was seen in Brussels and in other Western capitals as a sign of the modernity and maturity of the Turkish democracy. Indeed, soon enough a real fight between the AKP and the most prominent sectors of Turkish secularism began. A request for closure and for the ban of its highest officials from any public office for five years (including Erdogan and President Gul) was filed in 2008 by the Chief Public Prosecutor in front of the Constitutional Court. A single vote kept the Constitutional Court from ruling against disbanding the party, although it did recognize that the AKP was indeed a source of actions against secular democracy. For its part, specially after a more convincing victory in the 2007 parliamentary elections, the AKP began curbing the prerogatives of the military, the judiciary and some sectors of the media. In what some consider a well orchestrated campaign, a series of plots aimed at overthrowing the AKP government were uncovered, leading to the arrest of several retired and on duty senior military officers, judges, journalists and intellectuals. The plots, the so-called Ergenekon, Sledgehammer and the Cage Plan, provided an excuse to discredit the military and to limit some of their indeed large powers.<sup>12</sup> Some important media changed ownership, moving to close associates of the government, while one of the major media conglomerates, the pro-secular Dogan Group, became the target of strong criticism by pro-government dailies and of stricter fiscal controls. Slowly, the AKP seems to have eroded some of the basic institutions of the Kemalist republic: in September 2010, a referendum proposed by the government may introduce constitutional amendments that will give the executive a stronger grip on the judiciary – a branch usually considered a secular watchdog. If in 2002 Turkey was indeed an unbalanced democracy where the military and other institutions had great implicit power to control the life of the State, now, after almost eight years of AKP rule, the balance has shifted heavily in the opposite direction, leaving the country as unhinged as before.

## Conclusions

The AKP has undoubtedly left an important mark on contemporary Turkey by heavily affecting its foreign orientation and its domestic structure. Some of these changes may actually be structural, rather than temporary. Whichever party wins the next general elections in 2011, will most likely not waste the capital gains in the Middle East. An electoral victory of the opposition Republican People Party (the main centre-left and secular party, a cornerstone of the Kemalist republic), which seemed possible after the recent arrival of a new, more popular leader, will definitely lead to the recovery of what was lost during these last few years, namely the friendship with Israel and close relationship with the US and the West in general. However, after the Mavi Marmara incident, the popularity of the AKP has reached a new peak: a third mandate for Erdogan as Prime Minister might push these changes forward, both internally and externally, consolidating them even further. Whatever Turkish voters decide next year, the EU and the US must come to terms with a country that has risen from being just the eastern corner of the Western world, and become the centre of a series of geopolitical interests projected towards the Balkans, the Maghreb, the Middle East and the Caspian Sea.

### (Endnotes)

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