

TURKISH NEO-OTTOMANISM: A TURN TO THE MIDDLE EAST?

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2009, the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan became the hero of the Arab world by launching a scathing criticism of the Israeli President Shimon Peres at the Davos Summit. The backdrop was the Israeli operations in Gaza, which had received much media attention, but little condemnation from prominent state leaders. As it happened, the host tried to cut off Erdoğan so as not to cause embarrassment, and the whole episode ended with Erdoğan walking out of the studio in protest.

Since Turkey joined NATO in 1952, the organisation has been the foundation of Turkish security thinking.¹ The country has not wavered much in its support for either NATO or the US until the Second Iraq War in 2003. While staunchly supporting the US, Turkey has also been held forth by the Americans as a model for the Muslim world. But the way ahead is not as clear as it used to be. Many have been asking the question of whether the Turkey's Islamist government will take the country's strategic orientation in a different direction. Before President Barack Obama came to power in the United States, Turkey and the United States were frequently at loggerheads over the future of Iraq, and the AKP² government has been displaying strong scepticism against the US.

¹ For a comprehensive history of Turkey's foreign policy, see Hale 2000.

² The *Justice and Development Party* (AKP) has been in government since 2002, and is an offshoot of an Islamist party. Though the party is often cast by opponents as a cover for radical Islamism, it identifies itself more along the lines of Christian democratic parties of Europe, wooing pious constituents with value conservative but economically liberal politics.

Turkey has a voice in many of the forums of international society, and it appears to increasingly use it to speak up for such causes as the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza and the Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang Province. For a country that has been treading carefully internationally in all but the cases where its own interests were threatened, this is an unusual move. Its former *realpolitik*-position appears to be challenged, or at least reinterpreted with the coming to power of the new Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutğlu. Where Turkey before hardly challenged the great powers and their allies, it now speaks up for Muslims and Turkics even when they have a lot to lose by doing so. This turn to the Middle East has been dubbed a "Neo-Ottomanist" trend. The new foreign policy-making elite believe that they may increase their bargaining power on the international arena by seemingly representing more people than Turkey's 70 million inhabitants. If Turkey can claim to speak for oppressed Muslims in the Middle East and misruled Turkics in Central Asia, it may be able to pack a bigger punch internationally, and not be fully as reliant on its NATO allies as it once was.

FROM KEMALISM TO NEO-OTTOMANISM

The westernisation of the Turkish nation state was an identity project that defined itself *vis-à-vis* the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic values of the Middle East. The Kemalist nationalism initiated its boundary-producing performance between the Self and Other through secularism (Keyman 2005: 277; Mango 2000: 22). Hence, the Turkish Self, in hegemonic Kemalist discourse, is a modern Self based on a contrast to its Ottoman temporal Other represented as stagnant, backward and corrupt. This is a practice-based and inclusive identity project, since the Ottoman Empire became an Other through its values, principle and leadership, without making a clear distinction in terms of territory or population. The Turkish Self was cast as cultured and civilised, in a contrast to its neighbours and inner Others. "Turkey is a Western nation, severed from its Ottoman traditions, but the Kurds are a completely outside civilisation, and hence the Turkish project for the Kurds was a mission *civilisatrice*" (Şahin 2005: 103). Through such a process, the Kurds and all the other uncivilised elements of the state

could become part of the Self through a change of practice.

Traditional Turkish security discourse is made up of two components; a fear of geographical abandonment and loss of territory and an assumption of “geographic determinism” (Bilgin 2005: 183). Although probably originating in similar experiences much earlier, the former component is usually called the Sèvres Syndrome. The Sèvres Treaty imposed by the Great Powers in 1920 set forth to divide the Ottoman Empire into tiny states based on its minorities, each backed by a Great Power. Turkey was to be left with a rump state in central Anatolia, and a British-backed Kurdistan would get a major part of what is today south-eastern Turkey. Turkey fought its War of Independence to prevent this from happening and succeeded in securing the current borders. The Sèvres Syndrome is a propensity to think that foreign powers always seek to weaken and divide Turkey, in pursuit of their own interests (Altunışık, 2006: 193). For this reason, all mention of minority rights in Turkey by a foreign power is cast as a ploy to divide and rule. Not all Turks united immediately behind the cause of the nationalists in 1920, and there were Turks who collaborated with the Great Powers. This has given the Sèvres Syndrome a domestic reflection, and in Turkish political discussions, there is a tendency of seeing a Great Power on the other side of the table when doing domestic politics. However, joining NATO in 1952 calmed Turkish fears of abandonment and became an important pillar in Turkey’s Western orientation, by providing both recognition and security (Bilgin 2005: 184). The idea of geographical determinism remains, expounding the idea that Turkey occupies the most strategic place in the world, with areas of instability on all sides.

After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, few countries have a more anti-American population than Turkey (Pew Global 2008: 3). The rise of Turkish anti-Americanism is synonymous with casting US actions in the perspective of the Sèvres Syndrome and presenting the US as Turkey’s Other. This is a counter-current to the traditional security discourse of the Turkish military, where NATO-membership is the fundament. Soner Çağaptay argues that the AKP government deliberately uses anti-Americanism to bolster its own political position. He quotes the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan, saying that: “the West

uses terrorism to sell Turkey weapons” and that “Turkey has borrowed only immoral stuff from the West.” (Çağaptay 2008).

Where the Kemalist discourse has an othering of the Ottoman Empire, this new Turkish identity discourse others the US and presents the Ottoman Empire as an ideal. However, Kemalists and the AKP have different perceptions of what the Ottoman Empire was. In a strain typical of this neo-Ottoman discourse it is argued that a “The Ottoman history of governing the holy city (Jerusalem) in peace, in a tolerant atmosphere, (...) has become a source of national dignity and a sense of pride for the Islamic world” (Aras 2001:1-2). In this discourse the Ottoman Empire is not at all the backward and corrupt entity that the Kemalists speak of, but rather a peaceful, multi-ethnic and tolerant golden age. With the Ottoman Empire as an ideal, the Kemalist internal mission civilisatrice vis-à-vis inner Others mutates into historic duty of protective hegemony over the Middle East. According to the neo-Ottoman logic, there is a “yearning for the security of the past in the form of the Ottoman government, with a particular reference to its multi-ethnic and diverse religious nature, has surfaced in former Ottoman territories” (Aras 2001: 1). According to this understanding, it is the former Ottoman subjects who yearn for the Ottoman Empire, not Turkey who wants to pursue such a course.

The Turkish political scientist Tarık Oğuzlu argues that Turkish foreign policy is increasingly “Middle Easternising”, as he calls it, and that from now on Turkey will be more affected by events in the Middle East than in Europe (Oğuzlu 2008: 3-4). The reason for this, he argues, is simply that the Middle East offers Turkey bargaining power vis-à-vis the West (Oğuzlu 2008: 7). The point when Turkey started “realising” that its interests did not always converge with the US and the EU was when the US allied with the Kurds of Northern Iraq in 2003, and the EU did not fulfill its promise to the Turkish Cypriots of membership in the EU for their cooperation on the Annan Plan (Oğuzlu 2008: 12).

To turn to the history of this phenomenon, it is worth mentioning that three interlinked processes in the 1980s led a trend of more Islamic-oriented politics in Turkey. First, there was a Turkish-Islam Synthesis, which, to patch up the divisions after the 1970s and the

1980 coup, emphasised Islam as a unifying factor. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, this, along with the Turkic aspect of its identity, offered Turkey an ability to develop closer relations with the newly founded republics of Central Asia, Caucasus and the Balkans. The AKP government has placed more emphasis on this aspect of Turkish foreign policy than most previous governments, simultaneously placing an emphasis on Turkey's Islamic and Middle Eastern characteristics. Oğuzlu argues that a motivating factor for this, is the commonly held perception that Turkey, as the heir of the Ottoman Empire, holds a particular responsibility for the international relations in former Ottoman territories (Oğuzlu 2008: 13). Oğuzlu also points out quite a few instances where Turkey has become an important player in the Middle East. However, the fact that Turkey is a) now more influenced by what happens in the Middle East and b) trying to act in the Middle East, does not mean that Turkey is increasingly adopting practices associated with the Middle East. On the contrary, it is adopting practices commonly associated with Europe on the Middle Eastern arena.

The AKP has been very careful not to become the West's spokesman in the Middle East, but rather trying to support liberalisation and democratisation on its own terms (Oğuzlu 2008: 14). Turkey tries to win influence in the West by being the broker of Middle Eastern power, while at the same time trying to spread its own ideals of democratisation and religious moderation in the Middle East. According to Oğuzlu, the attempt to spread its own ideals in the Middle East is grounded in the fear that developments in the Middle East may destabilize Turkey itself. The emphasis on ideals and soft power, is in Oğuzlu's rationale part of the effort to become a European country. The extension of Turkish ideals into the Middle East means that Turkey is acting according to European rules for power projection in an area notorious for its use of hard power.

In addition to the two categories that are frequently used in Western analysis of Turkish foreign policy, Islamists and Westernisers, there has recently appeared a third strain within Turkish foreign policy thinking; the Eurasianists. These are nationalists within the secularist ranks. Many are active or retired military personnel, but there are

civilians as well. The Eurasianists appeared as a response to the US Greater Middle East project, which they believed was part of a plan to subjugate Turkish interests to those of the United States (Ozel 2009). They also believe that the US is trying to turn Turkey into a “moderately Islamist” state, in order to better control it. Following the Iraq invasion, the Eurasianists thought US and Turkish interests were no longer converging, and Turkey should seek partners elsewhere, on a more equal footing, among Russia, China and Iran (İbrahimoglu 2007).

Although the Eurasianist standpoint is not entirely new, it was first labelled as such in March 2002. Then Secretary General of the National Security Council, General Tuncer Kılınç, asked Turkey to drop the EU, and seek cooperation with Russia and Iran, without turning its back on the United States (Ozel 2009). He later called on Turkey to get out of NATO. Many of the people associated with this line of thinking, particularly within the security apparatus, have been arrested in connection with the so-called Ergenekon³ case.

ISLAMIST EUROPHILES

A major change in the Islamist foreign policy agenda came after the Islamist Refah Partisi (Welfare Party) was ousted from power and banned in 1998. This so-called “post-modern coup” was greatly frowned upon by the EU as an undemocratic move. The Islamists, who had up until then identified Europe as an important enemy of Islam, suddenly had the EU as the main protector of their right to organise and to participate in political life. The party that took up the legacy of the Refah Partisi, the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), had EU membership as one of its most important causes. Whereas the Refah Partisi had been less successful in forging an alliance between liberals and conservatives and relied more singularly on the conservatives, the AKP got much support from pro-EU, pro-market and anti-state liberals. This makes AKP foreign policy less easy to understand than that of their predecessors. In many ways it can be claimed that the usual analysis which asks the question “is the West losing Turkey?”

³ This is an alleged plot to provoke forth a military coup against the AKP, and in the investigation many high profile officials within the bureaucracy, security services and the media have been arrested.

obscures much of what has already happened. What has happened is that Islamists who argue that democracy is the best way to govern a country, but are aware of the interconnectedness between their Muslim identity and that of other Muslim peoples, are seeking a place in Europe, and see EU as the protector of their human and religious rights.

Turkey has long since adhered to the foreign policy practices of European states, and 50 years of training diplomats and officers in coordination with NATO will not disappear overnight. Nevertheless, it is still an open question which of the European foreign policies Turkey will adopt. There can be little doubt that *realpolitik* has been an important idea in Turkish foreign policy circles. While this is a European concept and a European practice, adhering to the principles of *realpolitik* may in fact take Turkey out of the West's immediate sphere of influence. It is obviously important how the Turkish leadership interprets the interests that "dictate" the needs of Turkish foreign policy.

The West, particularly the US and Britain, consider much of their interests to lie in the Middle East, and they continuously present Turkey as "the bridge between the East and the West". Turkey is presented as "the model" for the Muslim world, or "what we should use to win the hearts and minds of the Muslims". In the later years Turkey has started to question that very role, and many Turks feel that this "bridge" or "tool" position, in a relationship of dependency to the West, is demeaning and dishonourable. In addition, and more importantly, they question whether this is how Turkish interests are best served. Rather than being the tool of the West, Turkey's new Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, has presented Turkey's new role as that of a "regional centre". It is this role that he tries to implement in the Middle East.

In one sense, the West is losing Turkey, but not in a civilisational sense of "losing it" to the Middle East; Turkey is aiming at being less dominated by its allies, but not discarding the alliance. A more independent foreign policy demands greater resources, and in the absence of a greater pool of military strength, Turkey is attempting to talk its way into the hearts and minds of the average Middle Easterner.

This takes it into conflict with certain regimes in the Middle East, but the gamble seems to be that a Turkey that can claim to be the genuine voice of the Middle East, free of the oppression of the Arab regimes, can also choose how to use this voice. Rather than being the Western model in the Middle East, as proposed by Western statesmen, Turkey seeks to be the mouthpiece of the Middle East in the West. According to Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu's reasoning, this is the most powerful position Turkey can get with its present resources.

Ahmet Davutoğlu has a relatively high profile as the architect of AKP foreign policy, but he has never held a parliamentary seat. When he was appointed foreign minister on 1st May 2009, this was a highly unusual step, as extra-parliamentary appointments are rare in Turkey. Nevertheless, it is a logical step, as it makes him both implement and take responsibility for the policy he devises. AKP foreign policy shows a remarkable continuity from the policy of the previous, non-Islamist, parties. As mentioned, there has been much outcry in the West that Turkey is "turning to the Middle East" or the like, the AKP government even tried to support the US-led invasion of Iraq. This attempt was thwarted by the Turkish Parliament (TBMM – Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi). A central pillar in the foreign policy of the AKP has been reforming Turkish laws and domestic practices to conform to EU standards. This is not something one would expect from a country "turning away from the West".

Traditionally Turkey has staked a lot on hard power, and has NATO's second largest standing army. The Turkish armed forces still have a lot of influence over political decisions, and any attempt to limit military expenditure will run up against opposition. The Turkish armed forces have been frequently used in foreign policy making. Along with the EU-reforms Turkey appears to put an increased value on soft power. How this has come about is not clear, but the dual situation of seeing how the EU influences its surroundings, and particularly Turkey itself, while at the same time being afraid of upsetting the candidacy process, may have put an increased value on soft power.

Turkey now has a Foreign Minister educated at an establishment quite different from those educating much of the Turkish political elite. Ahmet Davutoğlu is originally an academic, and while professor of

International Relations at Beykent University, Davutoğlu introduced the concept “neo-Ottomanism” into the Turkish foreign policy vocabulary (Davutoğlu 2000: 183-208). Davutoğlu played a central role in the Turkish shuttle diplomacy during the 2008 Israel-Gaza Conflict. This is exactly what he advocated as an academic; trying to create “strategic depth” by playing a leadership role in the Middle East. Neo-Ottomanism rests on the division of the world into central and peripheral countries, and the most central country of all is Turkey. It is central in the Middle East and indeed, it is central in Eurasia. Davutoğlu’s project is not to take Turkey from one regional system of states to another, but rather to shape a region around Turkey. The main thrust is that Turkey should no longer be the bridge it has been treated as, but attain the political position its prominent geographical position demands.

There is little new to the proposition that Turkey is the most central country in Eurasia. This idea has been circulated at least since the days of Yusuf Akçuraoglu (1904). What is new is the way it is enacted, and the fact that it is government policy. First of all, Turkey has put much into diplomacy in what may be called the “Neo-Ottoman near abroad” – those areas inhabited by either Turkic or Muslim peoples. The government has chosen causes that rally and unite a large proportion of the region’s population, such as the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2008 and the Chinese mistreatment of its Turkic Muslim minority. When all other countries are silent, this gives Turkey an important popularity boost. They give voice to what many think, but leaders of most neighbouring countries dare not say. Turkey then appears as a principled country, which puts its moral principles ahead of its state interest. To the Muslims of the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus, it can present itself as a protector of Muslims in need. To the EU and the US, it can claim to be a protector of human rights. Needless to say, this carries certain benefits in terms of cooperation with Muslim neighbours, and Turkey’s standing in the international community. Through becoming the moral leader and protector of the region, Turkey wants to create “strategic depth” to give it more weight in the international system. The goal is not to turn away from the West and from Western-created and -dominated organisations, but rather to

gather what is considered peripheral states behind itself and increase its own status on the international arena.

Although one would instinctively identify hard power with the armed forces and this new focus on soft power with the AKP and particularly with Ahmet Davutoğlu, this need not be so. Particularly when it comes to Turkish Northern Iraq policy, a major issue is direct investment. The pension fund of the Turkish armed forces is one of the biggest investors in Northern Iraq. This fund was set up specifically for strategic purposes, to supply the Turkish economy with concrete, steel and other goods that are closely linked with keeping the military independent of foreign supplies. Now, it is investing heavily in construction in Northern Iraq, as well as the oil fields in the region. Control over this fund is exclusively in the hands of the army, and hence it is difficult to see this as AKP government policy. This is all happening without much comment from the military's side, but it is not difficult to conclude that this is an attempt to integrate the region with Turkey and create an economic interdependence that makes it difficult to engage in direct military conflict. By making the Kurds and Turkmen of Northern Iraq more prosperous, Turkey may also bring stability to the area. As to the intentions of the armed forces, one may only speculate.

Diplomatic contact between Ankara and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) appears to be picking up. Ahmet Davutoğlu and the Turkish Minister of Trade Zefer Çağlayan visited Iraq on 11th August 2009. Before leaving for Baghdad Davutoğlu stated that the goal of the trip was “conveying [to the Iraqis] the principled attitude Turkey has been pursuing on Iraq's security, peace and future, and reiterating that Turkey stands with the Iraqi people regarding any development affecting the future of Iraq” (Kardas 2009). While in Baghdad, Davutoğlu met with his counterpart Hosyar Zebari. During a joint press briefing, he emphasised that Turkey's relations with Iraq rested on four principles; a common security area, high-level political dialogue, economic interdependence and peaceful coexistence on the basis of their common culture. Emphasising their common culture is not a frequent occurrence in Turkey's relations with the Arab world. The Baghdad Pact was not referred to on the basis of a shared culture,

but rather on the basis of shared interests. Davutoğlu may not mention Turkish interests while in Iraq, but it follows logically from his academic writings that Turkey's interest lies in cooperating with and representing outwards the former lands of the Ottoman Empire, with whom Turkey shares a great deal of its culture.

After a period of deteriorating relations between Turkey and the United States, the election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States appears to have brought about a marked change. Where the former President George Bush jr. had emphasised hard power over soft, Barack Obama's policy appears to fit better with what the AKP is trying to accomplish. Both sides try to speak softly and not threatening the use of hard power too early. In March 2009, then foreign minister of Turkey Ali Babacan, told a Turkish TV audience that the election of Barack Obama as American president had opened a 'new era' in the relationship between the two countries (Hale 2009: 143). This statement was repeated by President Obama himself about a month later, as he spoke to the Turkish parliament (TBMM) on 6th April. Turkey was the first Muslim country Obama visited after his inauguration, which was considered an important move in drawing Turkey into closer cooperation with the US. In his speech, President Obama alluded to the tensions the 2003 Iraq invasion had brought to the Turkish-American relationship. He also made it clear that he thought the United States had to make a whole set of new policies for the Middle East.

NORTHERN IRAQ

Few areas are as central to Turkish security policy as Northern Iraq, which has been characterised as both the "near abroad" and the "soft underbelly" of Turkey (Oğuzlu 2001: 31). After the toppling of Saddam Hussein, what had been a relatively stable political unit in Northern Iraq appeared ready to assert its power and possibly proclaim independence. Meanwhile, Turkish public opinion was uncertain how to interpret the American venture in Iraq.

On the one hand, instability in Iraq would be difficult for Turkey to handle, on the other, a strong, US-backed, independent Kurdish state would pose two major problems. First of all it may put its weight

behind the PKK, or at least give the PKK sanctuary, and second, it may have a symbolic impact on the Kurds within Turkey. The Turkish Republic fears a semi-independent Kurdish political entity in Northern Iraq would support the PKK.

The logical continuation of the Sèvres Syndrome is the perception that the Kurds in Iraq are the tools of American imperial ambitions. Indeed, in the film *Valley of the Wolves*, the situation is portrayed as one of war by proxy between Turkey and the US. With Obama in office on the promise of pulling American troops out of Iraq, Turkish fears of American imperial ambitions may be soothed, but the potential for an independent Kurdish state in what is today Northern Iraq may be stronger than it has ever been.

One major event strengthened the Sèvres Syndrome more than any other and confirmed for the more nationalist Turks that a new Sèvres was a real possibility. In September 2006 the American Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Peters presented a map of what he called the “New Middle East” to a group of NATO officers at NATO’s Military College in Rome, Italy. The map showed the borders of the entire region redrawn and a major portion of Turkey’s east had become part of what was labelled “Free Kurdistan”. The map had been approved by the U.S. National War Academy before it was presented. Turkish officers present at the meeting were outraged, and the Turkish Chief of Staff, General Büyükanıt, protested the event through official channels (Nazemroaya 2006). Along with statements by popular American commentators who have been conflating Turkey with other regimes that do not fall into line behind US policy, this feeds the feeling of isolation and confirms the Sèvres Syndrome.

The territorial foundation of the new Turkish Republic established in 1923 was the National Pact (*Misak-i Milli*), which corresponds almost perfectly to Turkey’s present borders, but also encompassed Northern Iraq (Hale 2007: 13). Turkey kept its claim to this area until 1926, when it dropped it against British opposition. During the First Gulf War the claims became relevant again. Then Turkish President, Turgut Özal, wanted to open a northern front against Saddam in order to be “at the table of the wolves” if Iraq was divided (Hale 2007: 45). Even if it did not fall apart, he thought it necessary to be on the inside,

to prevent Syria and Iran from filling a power vacuum (Hale 2007: 47). In the end, he became the patron of the Kurdish leaders Talabani and Barzani, whom he let set up offices in Ankara and gave Turkish diplomatic passports. There were even suggestions that Talabani, who is now President of Iraq, wanted Turkey to annex Northern Iraq and create a federation between the two (Hale 2008: 53-55). In the run-up to the Second Gulf War, the Turkish Minister of Defence suggested that Turkey had not given up its old claims to the area, and was ready to assert them in case of an invasion (Hale 2007: 97).

From around 2001 Turkish media started focusing on the Turkmens of Iraq as ethnic kin to the Turks (Tank 2005: 80). One example of policy papers backing up this claim is written by Tarik Oğuzlu in 2001, where it was argued that “the Turkish claim to the region were based on solid grounds (... and were) predicated on the population structure in Mosul and Kirkuk in that the majority of this region consisted of Turks [my emphasis]” (Oğuzlu 2001: 14). Oğuzlu suggests supporting Turkmen companies and help them build economic muscles, and providing them protection within Iraq, in a bid to strengthen their (and hence their Turkish protectors’) bargaining power inside Iraq (Oğuzlu 2001: 34-36). Eight years later, Turkey is the biggest investor in Northern Iraq, with 1200 companies present in the area, dominating retail and construction with 14 000 Turkish employees (Yılmaz 2007).

TURKISH-SYRIAN RELATIONS

Syrian-Turkish relations have long been strained even though Turkey shares its longest common border with Syria and various other geographic, cultural, and historical links tie the two neighbouring states together. The friction started with the dispute over the Hatay Province. In 1938 Hatay became independent from the French mandate of Syria as the Republic of Hatay. Following a referendum in 1939, it decided, under strong Turkish influence, to join Turkey. This self-annexation was never recognized by Syria, which continues to show the Hatay Province of Turkey as part of Syria’s territory on maps (Morris 2005). However, the two main problems have been water disputes resulting from the Southeastern Anatolia Project, and Syria’s support for the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK). Water disputes have

been a major source of conflict, as Turkey has constructed several dams on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers as part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project to develop the region (Morris 2005). Turkey has condemned Syria for supporting the PKK, which is listed as a terrorist organization internationally by a number of states and organizations, including the USA, NATO and the EU and has claimed that Syria employed Alois Brunner to train Kurdish militants for attacks against Turkey. Tension came to a head in 1998, when Turkey amassed troops on the Syrian border, threatening invasion unless Syria expelled the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. After Syria gave in, relations between the two states has improved greatly.

The two countries came to the brink of war when Turkey threatened military action if Syria continued to shelter Abdullah Öcalan in Damascus, his long-time safe haven. Relations have improved since October 1998, when Öcalan was expelled by Damascus and Syria pledged to stop harbouring the PKK rebels. The 1999 signing of the Adana agreement, following his subsequent capture in Kenya, promised security cooperation between the two countries.

The Turkish Parliament's refusal to cooperate militarily with the 2003 US invasion of Iraq was a turning point in Syrian-Turkish bilateral relations as Syria's perception of Turkey as incapable of acting independently of NATO was altered. In late 2004 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan flew to Damascus to sign a free trade agreement in the follow-up to former Turkish President Turgut Özal's high-level trade negotiations with Syrian authorities, which included the first ever visit to Turkey by a Syrian President. In the 1990s and Erdoğan's own recently successful bid to initiate a Turkish EU accession which would allow Europe, "to extend its reach to the borders Syria, Iraq and Iran." (Morris 2005)

In 2008 Turkey was, as a sign of mutual trust in Damascus and Tel Aviv, invited to play the role of facilitator between Syria and Israel to solve their dispute over control over the Golan Heights. These talks were abandoned following the deterioration in Turkey-Israel relations after Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan criticised Israel's conduct of the 2008-2009 Israel-Gaza conflict as a "crime against humanity." In April 2009 the two states announced an unprecedented three-

day military manoeuvre involving ground forces along their mutual border in what was described as “a step further in their ever expanding cooperation.” According to Turkish military sources, “The aim of the exercise is to boost friendship, cooperation, and confidence between the two countries land forces, and to increase the ability of border troops to train and work together.” The exercise which commenced on April 27 involved teams from each country crossing the border to visit outposts.

The Syrian and the Turkish Defense Ministers also signed a letter of intent giving the green light for cooperation in the defence industry, on the sidelines of the 9th International Defence Industry Fair (IDEF'09) that commenced in Istanbul the same day. This is a sign of the level of political relations reached between the two states. However, a Turkish defence industry source emphasised that, “it does not mean that the two countries will immediately enter into cooperation in arms production.”

The Turkish President Abdullah Gül went on an official visit to Syria soon after the exercise, in reciprocation of Syrian President Assad's 2007 official visit to Turkey. According to a senior Turkish diplomat, “The main topic on the agenda and the goal of the visit is the maintenance of momentum that has built up in bilateral relations within the last decade” (Today's Zaman 2009a)

Shortly before the visit the new Syrian Ambassador to Turkey Nidal Qablan confirmed that Syria was ready to restart the Turkish mediated peace negotiations with Israel and Gül supported the call, following his meeting with Assad, stating that, “We have heard Syria say it is ready to resume the peace talks from the point where they stopped with the previous [Israeli] government. We in Turkey are also ready” (Today's Zaman 2009b). This, the Syrian President Assad confirmed, “Turkey's role is important because we have trust in Turkey.”(Today's Zaman 2009c) However, the Israeli President Shimon Peres dismissed these calls stating, “The Syrians should be ready to talk. If President al-Assad wants peace, why is he shy? We suggested direct talks many times. He thinks direct talks are a prize for Israel. It's not a prize. It's normal.” (Today's Zaman 2009d).

IRAN

Turkey has a much closer relationship to Iran than any of the other NATO members have. Compared to the other members, Turkey is fairly relaxed over the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. This is particularly noteworthy, as Turkey occupies the frontline in any NATO confrontation with Iran. Ankara's close economic and political ties with Iran makes Turkey a leading beneficiary of a *détente* between Washington and Teheran. Should Iran press forward with its nuclear programme, Turkey's relationship with the United States would soon be tested. The AKP government in Turkey kept remarkably quiet during the protests over Ahmedinejad's reelection in June 2009. Although the AKP is nominally Islamist, the Turkish secularist charge that they have Iran as a model does not stick. The lack of response was more likely to be strategically than ideologically founded. The AKP government in Ankara wants to continue conducting business as usual with Iran. One of the important benefits of this has been coordinated efforts against Kurdish insurgents, which actually entails direct cooperation on the tactical level between the Iranian and the Turkish armed forces. This cooperation has made it impossible for insurgents to merely slip across the border when one side is conducting its military offensives.

With good relations to Iran, Turkey emphasises its potential role as an interlocutor between Iran and the United States, along the lines of its role between Syria and Israel. It is speculated that Turkey played a major role in the release of the American-Iranian journalist Roxana Saberi (Lesser 2009). However, it is not given that Turkey would be comfortable with delivering harsh messages to the Iranian leadership. Playing the role of the interlocutor may strain Turkey's relationship to both Iran and the United States, but it shows that Turkey is seeking an increasingly important role in its neighbourhood; that of the diplomatically founded regional power.

CONCLUSION

Turkey's role as the "bridge between East and West" has been given new meaning by the AKP leadership. Rather than a bridge to be trundled across on the way to dominating the Middle East, Turkey is trying to become the voice of the Middle East in the forums of international society. A new way of thinking about the Ottoman Empire has (rightly or wrongly) emphasised its culture of tolerance and the peaceful coexistence within the empire. With its history of leadership in the region, Turkey now tries to use this legacy for improving the region and by bringing stability also securing Turkey's own position. The emphasis on the non-martial qualities of the Ottoman Empire smacks of practices commonly associated with the EU. Rather than trying to coerce its neighbours through the use of its large military force, Turkey has engaged in shuttle-diplomacy and economic ties with former foes. It also tries to make itself an indispensable part of international society by playing a facilitating role between Israel and Syria and between the United States and Iran. Its "neo-Ottomanist" approach to foreign policy is not only focused on Muslim countries. Turkey has recently made serious progress in its relationship with Armenia, and the border between the two countries is set to open in the near future. Instead of dominating existing geographic units, Turkey appears to try to create a region of their own, the centre of which is Ankara.

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