

# Turkey's foreign policy moves away from the US and Israel have not met with success

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*As one of the few secular democracies in the Middle East, Turkey faces strategic pulls from its Islamic neighbours, and from the US over its policies towards Israel. **Kostas Ifantis** argues that the present government's recent moves towards closer relations with countries like Iran, and its involvement in the Syrian civil war have thrown up a new problems, and exacerbated old ones. With its reputation tarnished by the recent protests, Turkey's is now finding that its grand designs for the Middle East are being frustrated by regional realities.*



Turkey is changing, and changing fast with its **Kemalist** secular tradition being challenged as the country's dominant identity source. In foreign policy, Turkey has adopted a much more Ankara-centric approach to the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, embodied in the ideologically driven "Davutoglu doctrine" (named after Turkey's Foreign Minister). Meanwhile the US, under Obama, has been attempting to focus its strategic gaze in East Asia, showing a declining appetite for a more direct involvement in the Middle East. Turkish-US relations have been subject to changing domestic conditions, changing regional aspirations as well as regional and global power reconfigurations.

Since the late 2000s, the old strategic order in the Middle East has been crumbling. Egypt is in a state of chaos. In Lebanon, the Hezbollah party-cum-militia holds sway. Syria is in the throes of a war whose outcome will be critical to the regional status quo; Iraq's future is very uncertain; and such developments come at a time when American influence in the Arab world has seriously waned.



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu By U.S. Department of State [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

For the leadership of the ruling AKP party, reaching out to the Islamic world has been justified on the grounds that Turkey should no longer neglect its exceptional historic and cultural ties with the strategically critical Middle Eastern, North African and Eurasian regional complexes. However this sense of exceptionalism has led to flawed regional

assessments and to a distorted view of Turkey's relative power and influence. For example, by refusing to support the economic sanctions against Tehran and by identifying Israel as part of a nuclear Iran problem, Ankara has been breaking away from the dominant assessment in the West, and has been running the risk of further polarizing its relations with Israel and the US.

In the case of Turkish-Israeli relations, the June 2010 *Mavi Marmara* 'flotilla crisis' illustrated Ankara's shift in conducting an active but risky diplomacy across the Muslim and Arab world and unearthed a significant strategic divergence on the regional security imperatives vis-à-vis Washington. Turkey's great regional and international weight, however, means that diverging from the West could seriously impact on the regional balance of power and beyond.

The March 2013 Israeli formal apology to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan should be seen as an attempt by the US to pull Turkey back in line and on the side of the US and Israel. Washington wants Israeli-Turkish relations to be reset both because it will enhance Israel's security and because Turkey is seen as a potential facilitator in the context of a new US peace push. The move was celebrated in Ankara but full normalization of bilateral relations is still far off. A deep and lasting normalization will certainly require a strategic and geopolitical reassessment by all involved in the major regional questions like Israeli security, Palestinian statehood, and Muslim alignments along the Sunni-Shiite axis. At the same time, the change in Turkey's attitude has been important, when one thinks that Ankara diluted its position considerably: the lifting of the Israeli embargo and blockade on Gaza appears to be forgotten. This shows that mortgaging its relations with Israel to the Israeli-Hamas fault line, where Ankara's influence is limited at best, was a major strategic mistake.

In Syria, Turkey found itself on the other side of the Sunni-Shiite divide, confronted by Iran, Hezbollah and the Shiite government in Iraq; it was drawn into a sectarian quagmire. Overall, Turkish policy towards Syria has been seen as "misconceived", personal and ideology-driven, and as such unstable. First, there was a miscalculation on how long Assad would last and what he is capable of doing. Second, Ankara also miscalculated Assad's isolation and believed that under the leadership of the US and Turkey, the regime would easily topple. Yet, Iran and Russia turned out to be extremely generous when it came to providing political, military and economic support. Finally, Turkey's unrestrained confidence in the Syrian National Council, Free Syrian Army and other armed groups fighting Assad became a serious nuisance.

For Turkey, however, the stakes are high. The emergence of Syrian Kurds under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – seen as Syrian offshoot of the nationalist PKK – affixed regional context to Turkey's Kurdish issue. It has been reported that many of Syria's Kurds hope to use the civil war as an opportunity to carve out an autonomous or even sovereign Kurdish region in Syria. The prospect of having to deal with an increasingly assertive Kurdish statehood-seeking population in its borders left Ankara with one viable strategic option: to work with them. It became a strategic imperative to neutralize the PKK by disengaging it from the Tehran-Damascus alliance. Ankara wants to break the monopoly control of the PKK and the PYD and replace it with the Kurdish National Council. Turkey had no real leverage to dissuade the PKK leaders at their Kandil Mountains headquarters adjacent to Iran. Only the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan could exercise real influence. On 21 March 2013, a cease-fire came into effect. Whether the talks will proceed as planned is still very much uncertain.

Despite all the joy that came with the Arab Spring's popular uprisings in 2011, the Arab Middle East remains a very unstable and unpredictable region where the multidimensional crisis cannot be expected to produce viable, functional and more democratic regimes anytime soon. The AKP's foreign policy with emphasis on Muslim solidarity, and its embrace of actors hostile to the US, the West and Israel, has run into the political and social realities of the region. Success has not been forthcoming and a process of redefinition may be underway. Moreover, the recent [Gezi Park protests](#) and the police crackdown have not only tarnished Turkey's credibility as an exemplary democracy, but they have also weakened Ankara's overall standing. The coup against the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt could be considered as a major foreign policy loss for Ankara given the aspirations of Erdogan to emerge as the leader of Sunni Islam in the region, and Hamas and the Kurdish Regional Government cannot be

regarded as strategic pillars for regional grand strategy. The gap between grand designs and the regional realities in the Arab world is such that no one can afford not to mind.

*This article is based on the GreeSE paper: “[The US and Turkey in the fog of regional uncertainty](#)”.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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