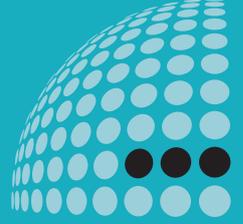


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US-Turkey Relations in the AK Party Decade

Kadir Üstün, Kılıç Buğra Kanat



ABSTRACT

Turkey's relations with the United States over the last decade witnessed wild swings and shifts. Turkey's past decade under the AK Party coincided with the US invasion of Iraq, the financial meltdown in the US (which transformed into a global economic crisis) as well as a relative decline of the US stature in the world. This period also overlapped with dramatic changes in the Middle East, as the ousting of longstanding authoritarian leaders led to the emergence of a generation of new leaders across the Arab world. Today, a new Turkey as a regional power is faced with a new US effort to reconsider its role in the region and around the globe. In this analysis, our goal is to take a broad view of the AK Party decade in US-Turkey relations and contribute to the debates on the future of the relationship and its potential implications for the region.



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US-TURKEY RELATIONS IN THE AK PARTY DECADE

INTRODUCTION

Turkey's relations with the United States over the last decade witnessed wild swings and shifts, as a result of domestic transformations in Turkey, historic regional changes, and the posture of US foreign policy. Turkey's past decade under the AK Party coincided with the US invasion of Iraq, the financial meltdown in the US (which transformed into a global economic crisis) as well as a relative decline of the US stature in the world. This period also overlapped with dramatic changes in the Middle East, as the ousting of longstanding authoritarian leaders led to the emergence of a generation of new leaders across the Arab world. While the sectarian violence that erupted after the invasion of Iraq shook the fault lines of the regional order, the Arab revolutions transformed entire political systems, creating a new era in Middle Eastern politics. During the past decade, Turkey gained candidacy status in the European Union, made great strides in consolidating its democracy, strengthened its economy, increased its diplomatic clout, and came onto the world scene as a regional power. A new Turkey as a regional power is faced with a new US effort to reconsider its role in the region and around the globe.

During the AK Party decade, Turkey began to revise its foreign policy doctrines and decision-making mechanisms in line with changes in its domestic politics and in the Middle East. Especially in its relations with the Middle East, Turkey became more involved in attempts to resolve regional problems. These overlapping transformations in the global and regional order as well as changes in Turkish politics and foreign policy influenced the nature of the relationship between the United States and Turkey. In the 1990s, US-Turkey bilateral relations experienced problems largely resulting from an overdue revision of the post-Cold War international system period in the wake of an emerging multi-polar world; the relationship entered into a crisis period. While the parties today still search for a new paradigm to describe the relationship and define the nature of the US-Turkey partnership, they continue to cooperate on issues of mutual interest and concern.

With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the leaders of both countries improved the level of communication and cooperation on regional issues. As a result, US-Turkey relations are probably in the best shape they have been in recent memory. As Presi-



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dent Obama embarks upon his second term, the AK Party is well positioned to be the dominant party in Turkish politics. In this analysis, we scrutinize what we consider to be some of the most significant turning points in the US-Turkey bilateral relationship over the AK Party decade. Our goal is to take a broad view of the AK Party decade in US-Turkey relations and contribute to the debates on the future of the relationship and its potential implications for the region. This overview should give us a sense of what may come next.

EVE OF THE AK PARTY DECADE

When the November 2002 elections brought the AK Party to power, Turkish-American relations were in a state of distress. While the last years of the Clinton administration and the first year of the Bush administration brought the countries closer together, there were significant problems waiting to be resolved. The US had started to recalibrate its policies towards many countries after the end of the Cold War but relations with Turkey were somewhat neglected. The US attempted to continue its relationship with Turkey using the same modus operandi it had during the Cold War. Turkey and the US maintained short term close cooperation during the first Gulf War largely due to the personal rapport between Turkish President Turgut Özal and US President George H. Bush, for which Turkey paid dearly in economic terms in its aftermath. In the mid-1990s, when PKK activity increased in its southeast, Ankara was disappointed with the level of US support for its fight against terrorism. In addition, the constant reiteration of the Armenian issue in the US Congress generated a public backlash in Turkey.

In the 1990s, for some in Turkey, the only way to elevate Turkey's standing in Washington was thought to be through the Israeli connection. The long established tutelary system in Turkey allowed a military to military relationship with Israel and the US without much civilian input or oversight. The Turkish view of the Israeli influence in US politics led to a trilateral relationship between Turkey, Israel, and the US in the late 1990s, mostly focused on security and military cooperation. In the last years of the Clinton administration, relations improved after Clinton's visit to Turkey and his speech to the Turkish Grand National Assembly. His visit to the towns that were destroyed during the 1999 earthquake, especially, created good will among the Turkish people. Following this, the Clinton administration also played an active role at the EU Helsinki summit in order to help Turkey acquire candidacy status in the EU.

Following the US elections in 2000, with a new administration in the White House Turkish-American relations improved as a result of two significant events. First, in February 2001, Turkey faced its worst economic catastrophe in its history following a crisis between President Ahmet Necdet Sezer and Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit. The US administration helped Turkey obtain the necessary loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to aid recovery. Second, after the September 11th attacks in the US, Turkey was one of the first countries that expressed support for the US's pursuit of the perpetrators of 9/11. The Bush administration's declaration of a global war on terror resonated with the Turkish state establishment's stance on terrorism. Turkey allowed US military forces to use Turkish air bases, supported the US operations in Afghanistan by contributing troops, and later shared important responsibilities within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

However, the first major rift in the new millennium between Turkey and the US occurred as a result of US plans to topple Saddam Hussein by invading Iraq. There was widespread opposition to US military action against Iraq in public opinion and among the European allies. At the outset of various media reports of a possible US attack on Iraq, Turkish leaders made cautious statements of concern and expressed that the attack may have negative consequences for the territorial integrity of Iraq and the future of the Middle East, noting that it would especially have catastrophic results for neighboring countries. For the Turkish security establishment and the Turkish public, the memory of the First Gulf War, which had resulted in a huge loss in trade and was thought to be responsible for the strengthening of the PKK in the Southeast, was still very much alive. Moreover, fear of the possible disintegration of Iraq and formation of an independent Kurdish state in Turkey's south was considered a major threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. In several instances, Prime Minister Ecevit had made similar statements expressing such concerns in his dialogue with President Bush and his envoys.

A WATERSHED MOMENT: THE MARCH 1, 2003 RESOLUTION

Following the AK Party's election victory in November 2002, the Bush administration extended an invitation to the party's leadership. By this time, the Bush administration's focus was shifting to Iraq, making Turkey a key ally to be counted on during the impending invasion. Although the chairman of the AK Party, Tayyip Erdoğan, was barred from running for public office at the time (for having served jail time for inciting violence by reciting a poem in a public address), he was warmly welcomed by the Bush administration at the White House. During Erdoğan's visit to Washington, the most significant agenda item was Turkey's position regarding the forthcoming US operation in Iraq. The closed meeting between Bush and Erdoğan led to speculation about Turkey's commitment to support the Iraq War. However, the Turkish government vehemently denied that any promise or commitment had been made by Erdoğan or by his delegation on this matter. Following this meeting, intense negotiations and bargaining between the newly formed Turkish government and the US administration were held. While the Turkish government continued to negotiate with the US, the new AK Party government also faced pressure from the Turkish public and media that was largely opposed to the invasion.

Starting in the late 1990s, Turkish public opinion began playing a more active role in shaping Turkish politics and foreign policy. The support of Turkish public opinion for the EU membership and the integration process was vital for the Turkish government to pass EU reforms, such as the criminal law amendment to abolish the death penalty, despite some reluctance from the state establishment. In addition, the Turkish public's reaction to the Israeli government during the Second Intifada and the nature of Turkish-Israeli relations forced the political leaders in Turkey to pay more attention to the Palestinian problem, which also transformed the relations between Turkey and Israel. Although the September 11 attacks were condemned in Turkey, Turkish support for the operation in Afghanistan generated public debate about Turkey's role and the degree of its involvement. Despite these earlier moments of Turkish public's influence, foreign policy decisions were largely left to the state establishment. However, the debate on the impending US invasion of Iraq was a dramatic turning point in terms of the

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public's influence on the US-Turkish relationship. The debate galvanized Turkish public opinion first against a US operation in Iraq and then against the possibility of Turkey's support of this operation. Formed under the banner of new antiwar organizations, different civil society groups reacted against US policy in the region and their goal was to prevent the Turkish government from supporting it. Demonstrations brought together thousands of people from different walks of life and the pressure on the newly elected parliamentarians grew intense.

The Turkish public's attention to the Iraq War was one of first steps in transforming Turkish foreign policy during this era, which was misunderstood by many in Washington and Western capitals. It is often overlooked that the majority of Turkish society opposed the Turkish government's support for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990. Twelve years later, the Turkish public began to exert substantial pressure on the government on issues pertaining to foreign policy. The negotiations between Turkish officials and the US government were labeled as shameful acts and the Turkish public considered the depictions of Turkey in the US media humiliating. On March 1, 2003, the Turkish parliament voted against the government's proposed resolution to allow US troops to open a northern front from the Turkish soil.

That vote marked the beginning of a major rift that would not be repaired for several years. Although the US expressed its respect for the democratic process in Turkey, its disappointment was clear. The US launched its attack against Iraq without Turkish support; low intensity tension between the two countries continued. The crisis reached its climax on July 4th of the same year when the US armed forces detained Turkish soldiers in Northern Iraq, putting hoods over their heads. Also known as the "hood incident," this event brought Turkish-American relations to an all time low. Attempts to contain the crisis failed. While unfavorable opinions toward the US increased dramatically following this incident, some pundits in Washington engaged in "who lost Turkey?" and "shift of axis" discourses on Turkey. The Turkish position on the Iraq War and the Turkish public's reaction were interpreted as Turkey turning away from the Western world. Some even started to call Turkey the "sick man of Europe." For many in Turkey, the negative attitude in policy circles and the media against Turkey was an attempt to 'punish' Turkey for its lack of support for the US invasion of Iraq.

Following the intensifying insurgency in Iraq and increased clashes between insurgents and US troops, the Turkish public became more reactive to the ongoing war. Even after the invasion, however, Turkey did not turn its back on the political developments in Iraq. Turkey was proactively engaged (for instance, through the "Neighbors of Iraq" conferences) to ensure stability and a quick recovery in Iraq. Turkey developed its relations with the Kurds in Northern Iraq and was instrumental in bringing together the Sunni opposition groups to participate in the political process. Meanwhile, high-level officials in the Bush administration, including Vice President Dick Cheney, continuously blamed Turkey for being responsible for the extension of the duration of the conflict. In spite of several attempts by both sides to repair relations, mutual trust had been severely damaged due to diverging perspectives regarding the future of Iraq and the region as a whole.

DIVERGENT VISIONS ON THE FUTURE OF THE REGION

Another important point of divergence between the US and Turkey during this transitional period took place as a result of their policy differences regarding the relations

with the other states and actors in the Middle East. Turkey's goal of economically integrating different states in order to form a conflict-free zone in the Middle East contradicted the US policy of internationally isolating "rogue regimes" in the region. Turkey's pro-active engagement with some of these regimes, such as Syria, was interpreted as a major deviation from the Western orientation of its foreign policy.

In the early 2000s, Turkey pursued to revive the rapprochement with Syria that it had initially launched in the late 1990s. Economic interaction and border stability between these two countries created a win-win situation. The rapid development of diplomatic relations was welcomed and enriched by social and cultural interactions between the two populations. Turkey also regarded Syria as a possible gateway for engaging economically with the rest of the Middle East. Under these circumstances, Turkey was resistant to any attempts by the US to isolate or sanction its new trading partner. However, for some in Washington, Turkey's increasing integration with Syria and its attempt to stop its international isolation together with its opposition to launch US troops from Turkey during the Iraq War were signs of shifting its foreign policy orientation towards "rogue regimes." Turkey's Syria policy created a new bout of low-level tension between Turkey and the US and contributed to furthering mutual distrust. The overt expression of discontent on the US side for Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's visit to Syria was especially perceived as an intervention into Turkish politics that continued to strain relations.

Another significant rift in US-Turkey relations emerged from the evolving Turkey-Israel relationship during the same period. Turkish-Israeli relations experienced their best years during the mid and late-1990s when the two countries signed multiple security and military cooperation agreements and launched a new strategic partnership to change the balance of power in the Middle East. However, in the late 1990s, the issues that had brought Israel and Turkey closer together started to subside. For instance, Syria was considered a common security threat in the early 1990s and was one of the reasons for the strategic rapprochement between Israel and Turkey. After the Adana Protocol was signed between Turkey and Syria, however, bilateral relations started to improve dramatically and Turkish-Israeli relations lost its common "other." Moreover, the Second Intifada and the rising level of violence in the region strained the relationship further. In the meantime, the public and political reaction to Israel started to also be directed toward the US. The decline in Turkish-Israel security relations, which in fact brought a degree of normalization, could not be replaced with a more diversified relationship. For most of the 1990s, the trilateral nature of the relationship between Turkey, Israel, and the US was considered its strongest dimension. However, rising regional violence triggered by Israel's heavy-handed policies against Palestinians caused these relations to deteriorate. After each instance of violence erupted in the region the bases of trilateral relations was further damaged considering that Turkey had traditionally criticized Israeli policies whenever they led to conflict. In contrast, whenever there was more hope for peace, Turkey's relations with Israel improved, which in turn strengthened Turkey's image in Washington.

With Turkey's new policy of involvement in the Middle East, Turkey's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict took on additional dimensions. Turkey made inroads in the Middle East in order to resolve the disputes between different actors. Turkish foreign policy makers considered talking with every actor to be one of the most significant steps to

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achieve this goal. This included Hamas, which the US and Israel recognized as a terrorist organization, and other parties in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well. Hamas's electoral victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2005 heightened tensions between the US and Turkey. The Turkish government considered Hamas a legitimate political party and invited the political leader of Hamas to Ankara. The US government reacted to the visit and through different channels made analogies between Hamas and the PKK. Moreover, different members of the US Congress also demonstrated their reactions to this visit. For Turkey, on the other hand, the visit was an attempt to quell the violence in the region and contribute to the peace process. Although many in the US considered the visit the end of a possible role for Turkey in the peace process, Turkey maintained relations with Israel.

Being able to talk to different sides became one of the assets of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey was interested in putting to good use its influence over Syria by brokering peace talks between Israel and Syria. However, this failed dramatically when Israel launched the Operation Cast Lead against Gaza in last days of 2005. The operation drew a bitter response and strong condemnation from Turkey. Amongst US policy circles, this was yet another sign of Turkey's drift away from pro-Western policies. The US justification for the heavy-handed Israeli policies in the name of Israel's right to exist did not resonate elsewhere, especially in Turkey. The US and Turkey clearly did not see eye to eye when it came to the regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Syria.

FORGING A NEW RELATIONSHIP

During the last two years of the Bush administration, there were occasional, albeit, symbolic gestures to prevent the relationship from deteriorating even further. Condoleezza Rice's visit in 2007 and the strategic vision document that was signed marked attempts to overcome the crisis that had started with the US invasion of Iraq and to solve the problem of mutual distrust between the parties. Countering terrorism especially fit the Bush administration's war on terror agenda and Turkey sought increased international help from the US and European allies on that front in its fight against the PKK. Signs of a truly changed US-Turkey relationship, however, came with the election of Barack Obama in 2008, initially delivering on his promise for a more multilateral approach to foreign policy. President Obama's first overseas visit was to Turkey and it was regarded as a welcome development among the Turkish public and policymakers. President Obama called the US-Turkey relationship a "model partnership," signaling a new US approach to Turkey. Obama's first term witnessed serious challenges, threatening to damage this vision. However, the special personal rapport between President Obama and Prime Minister Erdoğan helped US and Turkish policymakers overcome and respect their differences. The relationship would continue to be tested by major crises but the long list of successful cooperation between the two countries ensured that moments of crises remained manageable.

The Gaza flotilla raid in May 2010, where Israeli special forces killed eight Turkish and one Turkish-American citizens on board a civilian ship's humanitarian aid mission to Gaza, created a major source of disagreement between the US and Turkey. Turkey expected a US condemnation of the Israeli attack on the Gaza flotilla similar to those of the European allies but the US leadership felt caught between two strong allies, Turkey

and Israel. Instead, the US tried to calm down both sides without denouncing the attack publicly, which frustrated Turkey more. The deaths of eight Turkish and one Turkish-American citizens were unprecedented from the Turkish perspective, as it was the first time in Turkish republic's history that a foreign army attacked its civilian citizens. The largely pro-Israeli views in Washington exacerbated tensions with Turkey, which threatened to downgrade relations with Israel unless the Israeli government apologized, paid compensation, and lifted the blockade on Gaza. To this day, this remains the Turkish policy on this incident. Turkey expected the US to pressure the Israeli side but the administration did not feel that it was in a position to do so for domestic political reasons.

The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, is known to have spent much effort brokering an agreement between the two sides but to no avail. During the fifteen months since the Flotilla raid until the leak of the Palmer Report, Turkey restrained itself from responding while continuing to criticize Israel's policies. Gestures (Turkey's offer to help with the Carmel fire in Israel) and secret meetings between Turkish and Israeli diplomats were not absent. The Palmer Commission at the UN was conceived to create a political opening for both sides to come to an agreement, with which the US continued to work quietly behind closed doors. Having declined the Israeli request to extend the commission's mandate for another six months, Turkey announced its "sanctions" against Israel by downgrading diplomatic relations and freezing or canceling military contracts with Israel. As the US administration worked to find a solution, most of Washington's talk on Turkey revolved around whether Turkey was turning away from the West.

Questioning Turkey's relations with the Western alliance became commonplace when the Flotilla raid was followed by Turkey's "No" vote on sanctions against Iran at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Turkey was a non-permanent member of the UNSC and had worked to broker a deal with Iran over the nuclear issue. In June 2010, a comprehensive sanctions resolution was brought to the UNSC by the US. American diplomats had been working for about nine months to deliver the Russian and Chinese votes. Turkey had also been working since 2009 alongside Brazil, another non-permanent member, to broker a confidence building measure between the P5+1 and Iran through a nuclear swap deal. The deal was originally an American proposal that would have Iran exchange its enriched uranium for fuel rods that could only be used for civilian purposes. On the eve of the sanctions vote at the UNSC, Turkey and Brazil signed the "Tehran Declaration," where the nuclear swap deal would happen albeit with modifications that the US argued were unacceptable. The US was dismissive of the declaration, which it interpreted as a political ploy by Iran to avoid sanctions and divide the international community. This was probably the Iranian calculation but Turkey's argument was that this was the first time Iran signed an agreement placing any restrictions on its nuclear activity. Ultimately, this was simply a confidence building measure rather than a full-fledged solution to the Iranian nuclear issue.

Differences of opinion between the US and Turkey on the Iranian nuclear issue resulted in Turkey's "No" vote against the sanctions. As the Mavi Marmara incident and Turkey's UNSC vote occurred so close to each other chronologically, they created a lot of tension in US-Turkey relations. The good that came out of these episodes, however, was that both the American and Turkish leaderships understood that they needed to ensure much more frequent contacts and exchange of ideas. While there was much talk in Washington about Turkey's eastern "drift" and even the need to "punish" Turkey in

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some circles, both leaderships were mindful of the need to have a “frank” discussion. That discussion came in Toronto in June 2011 between President Obama and Prime Minister Erdoğan, where they reportedly had a “frank” conversation about the bilateral relationship. The conversation was ultimately productive, as the bilateral relationship grew stronger ever since.

A very recent critical turning point in US-Turkey relations was Turkey’s acceptance to host the NATO radar in Kürecik, as part of its missile defense shield. Discussions had been ongoing and Turkey asked NATO for Iran to not be identified in relation to the missile defense system. Russia also had concerns about the radar and wanted certain guarantees from the Obama administration about the nature of the missile defense system. Russian and Iranian criticisms were surely a concern but this, Turkey would argue, was a NATO project and it was defensive in nature. It would not threaten any neighboring country. Turkey’s timing of the announcement to host the radars could not be better as it announced sanctions against Israel on the same day. This was a clear message to the US that it would remove Israel from its relationship with the Western alliance, and ultimately from its bilateral relationship with the US. While the downgrading of relations with Israel was big news, the positive decision on the radar was even bigger. This largely stopped the criticism of Turkey in the US foreign policy circles about Turkey’s alleged shift away from the West. Strategic decoupling of Israel from the US-Turkey-Israel trilateral relationship would have structural implications. Now, the US-Turkey relationship could truly become a bilateral relationship independent of either country’s relations with Israel. The conventional wisdom of the 1990s that the road to Washington went through Tel Aviv first was now largely gone. When and if Turkish-Israeli relations were to be restored, they would operate as a separate track outside the US-Turkey relationship.

A NEW REGION

The US-Turkey relationship took on a fresh dynamic with the onset of the Arab Spring in early 2011. Ensuing Arab revolutions altered the regional security and political structure in the Middle East, seriously challenging the US-sponsored security framework in the region. Authoritarian leaders deriving their legitimacy from acquiescence to the regional order (forged to facilitate Israel’s security, free flow of oil to world markets, and fight against terrorism) were no longer legitimate in the eyes of the masses. The most significant regional development of the 2000s had undoubtedly been the US invasion of Iraq. Iraq’s invasion and the ensuing civil war had regional ramifications, which Turkey could not escape. Having learned its lesson from the first Gulf War, when it lost a lot of trade business because of sanctions and suffered from PKK activity out of northern Iraq, Turkey would not sit idly by this time around. In an effort to ensure Iraq’s unity, Turkish leadership was heavily involved the forging of a Sunni front and their participation in Iraqi politics. These efforts were accompanied by strong economic and political ties with the Kurdish leadership in Northern Iraq. While the invasion brought Iraq under Iran’s orbit in an unprecedented way, Turkey’s clout among the Kurds and Sunnis has also been very strong. Turkey proved itself as a stabilizing force in Iraq, a largely welcome development for the US policymakers that sought to withdraw from Iraq as soon as possible. When the revolutions and turmoil were unleashed throughout the region

in early 2011, Turkey emerged once again as a stabilizing force. The tone in Washington would now change to regard Turkey as a stable, secular, Muslim-majority democracy to actually be celebrated.

Turkey's approach to the Arab revolutions has demonstrated that the country's policy is focused on contributing to peace and stability while standing by the legitimate demands of the Arab peoples. Turkey had been working closely with authoritarian regimes over the past decade with the perspective that engagement would help countries such as Iran and Syria integrate into the region and the global system both economically and politically. This approach helped Turkey build deep relations with most of its neighbors and was instrumental in its economic and political rise in the 2000s. The US was suspicious of this approach and interested in confronting such regimes under the President Bush's Freedom Agenda. But when elections brought to power Islamist groups, such as Hamas in Palestine and threatened autocratic rulers such as Mubarak in Egypt, the US reverted to its policy prioritizing stability over democracy. Turkish foreign policy did not traditionally have a democracy promotion agenda so there was no serious domestic criticism of Turkish engagement policies. When the Arab Spring came along, however, Turkey was swift in acknowledging the regional earthquake for what it was. From then on, it was clear to Turkish policymakers, regimes deemed illegitimate by their people would not survive. Though reluctantly at first, the US adopted a similar stance while trying to ensure its core interests.

The earliest challenge for Turkey's stance came from Libya. Turkey had economic interests and more than twenty thousand citizens waiting to be shipped out of the country at the onset of the conflict. In the meantime, Turkey tried to broker an agreement with Qaddafi and the rebel fighters. When France, under President Sarkozy, attempted to lead a European coalition against the Libyan regime, Turkey worked to bring the operation under the NATO umbrella and participated in the operation. Turkey's initial reaction to military intervention was in line with its traditional non-interventionist posture but once it saw no other alternative, Turkey was adaptable and did not try to block the operation. This brief disagreement with the Western allies was not as consequential for Turkey's relations with the US. It was clear that Turkey would pursue policies in its own national interest, which could be at odds with those of the European countries or the US. This did not mean Turkey was trying to hamper Western interests rather seeking its own while developing a language that meaningfully responded to newly empowered people's legitimate demands.

When the revolution spread to Syria, Turkey was confronted with the most serious challenge of the Arab Spring. This was the regime with which Turkey had the deepest relations and leverage. Turkey spearheaded intensive efforts to convince the Assad regime to accommodate the people's demands to avoid the quagmire we have witnessed ever since. Turkey's efforts proved insufficient as the regime saw this as an existential fight for its own survival. The deeply authoritarian and repressive Syrian regime under Bashar Al-Assad proved itself just as merciless as it was under Hafez Assad. In the summer of 2011, Turkey adjusted course and called on Assad to step down, a step welcomed by the Obama administration. Critics have argued that Turkish calculations about the regime's expiration date were shortsighted. We should remember, however, once Turkey decided to endorse the new revolutionary movements elsewhere, it could not choose to do otherwise in Syria. From the US perspective, Turkey emerged as not

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only a strong partner but also a democracy deeply committed to the emergence of stable and democratic governments in the wake of a true regional revolutionary wave.

The remarkable shift in Washington's discourse focused on Turkey's shift of axis towards Turkey as a model country should be understood in this context. At the same time, the Obama administration is much more interested in working with allies and regional powers to share the burden in dealing with regional issues. Turkey has sought to have a say in regional affairs and expected the US to acknowledge the "New Turkey" with its diverse set of aspirations, interests, and policies that may not necessarily align with those of the US. While this understanding has been established to a large extent, serious regional and bilateral challenges remain. The conflict in Syria, Iraq's stability and unity, Iran's nuclear program, and the frozen if not dead peace process are only some of the regional challenges Turkey and the US have to face. At the bilateral level, Turkey seeks US support on dealing with PKK activity in Northern Iraq through security cooperation. In addition, potential conflicts with Iran and on the Israeli-Palestinian front still have the potential to derail the US-Turkey relationship. The Middle East will spend the next decade on reconstruction, economic development, and establishment of participatory democratic institutions. The US-Turkey relationship will be critical in this process especially if the counter-revolutionary forces in the region do not prevail over the new political forces.

CONCLUSION

US-Turkey relations have become more diverse than ever during the AK Party decade, as a result of the historic changes taking place in the Middle East and around the globe. Turkey's increased economic, political, and diplomatic clout has transformed it into a major player in regional affairs and the country aspires to become a global player over the course of the next decade. The US approach to the Middle East has fundamentally changed from an interventionist agenda to bring democracy to the region under the Bush administration to a more minimalist outlook under President Obama. During both administrations, US-Turkey relations have undergone the major tests we have outlined in this analysis. Relations proved largely resilient thanks to a long-standing relationship under NATO but Turkey has a much more independent outlook on many of the issues of common concern. At the same time, the Obama administration's attitude showed that this could be an asset, especially the Turkish leadership's willingness to take risks and bear responsibility on many issues. Major disagreements have allowed the US to sharpen its understanding of Turkish viewpoints, shifting away from the Cold War perspective. The AK Party leadership has insisted that the increasingly globalized world no longer gives Turkey the luxury to pursue a heavily western oriented foreign policy. Instead, it must pursue a diversified foreign policy that considers all of its borders: east, west, north, and south. The US policymakers have come to acknowledge that Turkey will watch out for its own interests and disagreements between the two countries will arise. Especially when Turkey has proven time and again that it has no interest in jeopardizing its strong ties with the EU and the US, Turkey's independent approach to many regional issues will have to be "swallowed."

During President Obama's second term, the US seems poised to conduct a much more minimalist approach to the region, as a whole, as it gears to shift its focus towards Asia.

This will surely take a long time and the crises that plague the Middle East will not go away. Especially with its security guarantees for Israel, its interests in the Persian Gulf, and its pledge not to allow an Iranian nuclear bomb, the US may have to get involved in the Middle Eastern affairs more than the administration would like. US posture would require regional actors to be even more active and Turkey would have to confront counter-revolutionary forces on its own as we have witnessed in Syria. And Turkey may feel the need to utilize its western alliance's strength (as in the case of stationing of NATO missiles in Turkey against a potential Syrian attack). If the conflict in Syria evolves into a regional conflict, it may be one that no single regional power can contain. This could be a source of future disagreement between the US and Turkey. US policies on Syria, Iraq (and PKK activities in Northern Iraq), Iran, and the Arab-Israeli conflict may cause further disagreements.

Today, the US-Turkey bilateral relationship is strong and independent of Turkey's relations with Israel or of the EU membership track. This is a significant development for the bilateral relationship, as it can be activated in the context of Middle Eastern affairs. Turkey has become an integral actor with whom the US needs to work in Iraq, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Turkey's behind-the-scenes work in the most recent Gaza flare up should be remembered here), and in Egypt. What this means is that Turkey and the US have a much broader set of common interests outside the traditional security-oriented frameworks. As their relations become varied and more complex, there is always more potential for misreading one another's policies or intentions. However, both sides have learned to live with and overcome such differences during the AK Party decade. This is unlikely to change but Turkey, with its aspiration to become a regional and global power, is likely to keep regional issues on the US agenda. If both sides can reassure one another that they are mindful of each other's interests and concerns, the US-Turkey relationship has the potential to contribute to regional peace and stability.

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Turkey's relations with the United States over the last decade witnessed wild swings and shifts. Turkey's past decade under the AK Party coincided with the US invasion of Iraq, the financial meltdown in the US (which transformed into a global economic crisis) as well as a relative decline of the US stature in the world. This period also overlapped with dramatic changes in the Middle East, as the ousting of longstanding authoritarian leaders led to the emergence of a generation of new leaders across the Arab world. Today, a new Turkey as a regional power is faced with a new US effort to reconsider its role in the region and around the globe. In this analysis, our goal is to take a broad view of the AK Party decade in US-Turkey relations and contribute to the debates on the future of the relationship and its potential implications for the region.

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