

Soli Ozel

# Indispensable even when unreliable

*An anatomy of Turkish-American relations*

In their recently published memoirs, former Vice-President Dick Cheney and former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wrote the following:

Turkey had stood with us in Korea and, as a NATO member, been an invaluable ally during the Cold War.... But by 2002 a worrisome change was under way, and my visit with Turkish leaders, though cordial, was far different from the one I had made in 1990, when we were seeking allies to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait...

In November 2002 the Islamist AKP party would win a majority in the parliament, making Recep Erdoğan, leader of the party, prime minister the following March. The newly elected parliament would reject our request to deploy the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division through Turkey....

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In general, I think we failed to understand the magnitude of the shift that was taking place in Turkey. The significance of an Islamist government taking power in one of America's most important NATO allies was in a sense obscured because of all the other challenges we faced.

Today, Turkey appears to be in the middle of a dangerous transition from a key NATO ally to an Islamist-governed nation developing close ties with countries like Iran and Syria at the expense of its relations with the United States and Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The freedom agenda as we knew would be the work of generations. Nevertheless, in the short term, it was important to have some concrete manifestation of the possibility of its success. Turkey was a stable country that, in its transition, was providing evidence that democracy and Islam could exist side by side.<sup>2</sup>

In a recent article, Şaban Kardaş argues against Ian Lesser's stance that Turkey's current foreign policy represents a third wave of strategic orientation, defined by the quest to find strategic assurance in rehabilitating traditional ties and strategic relationships with western allies, particularly the United States.<sup>3</sup> According to Kardaş, uncertain of the reliability of the United States, cognizant of Washington's diminishing capabilities, and in need of regional allies as the US begins its retrenchment phase, "Turkey will not trade its strategic autonomy for reassurance and deterrence. Be prepared to see some of the same old wine in a new bottle: policy convergence with the West accompanied by desire for autonomous action and rhetorical criticism of the West."<sup>4</sup>

Here you have all the codes you need to decipher Turkish foreign policy and particularly its relations with the United States. You have Turkey as the ingrate Islamically oriented country that turns its back on the west; then you

1 Dick Cheney, *In My Time* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 379.

2 Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown, 2011), 329.

3 Ian O. Lesser, "Turkey's third wave and the coming quest for strategic reassurance," German Marshall Fund for the United States, 26 October 2011, [www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org).

4 Şaban Kardaş, "The quest for strategic autonomy continues, or how to make sense of Turkey's 'new wave'," German Marshall Fund for the United States, 28 November 2011, [www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org).

have the Turkey of great ambitions, ambitions so great that it may overreach its capacity in this moment of enthusiasm or hubris; and finally you have a Turkey that takes advantage of the structural shifts in international relations, puts its own vision to work, defines its environment, and seeks to maintain its room for maneuver.

These quotes summarize the conflicting views of many in the United States concerning Turkey's government and its foreign policy. The recent downgrading of diplomatic relations with Israel, accompanied by acrimonious language on the part of the authorities, certainly reinforced such views. Turkey is seen by some as turning its back on the west, and the ruling Justice and Development party (AKP) is deemed to be Islamizing Turkey's foreign policy. Such views are propagated incessantly and disregard the actual record. That Turkey has just agreed to host the radar for NATO's Iran-aimed missile shield system, and that it works closely with the Obama administration on Iraq, Syria, and the broader Middle East, are both easily ignored.

Outwardly, the relations between the US and Turkey appeared to be on the rocks in the wake of the 2003 Iraq resolution to which Cheney alludes. The US felt betrayed by its long-standing ally. Turkey, on the other hand, felt that Washington totally disregarded the vital interests and well-founded concerns of Ankara when it undertook its ill-fated Iraq adventure. There were Turkish complaints because of insufficient American assistance against the terrorist organization Kurdistan Workers' Party headquartered in northern Iraq. There were serious disagreements over how to deal with Iran's nuclear program, which culminated in a row after Turkey's vote at the UN security council on sanctions against Iran. That vote generated rage in the White House and on Capitol Hill, but since then Ankara's relations with Tehran have changed considerably.

A final major cause for Turkish-American tension is the troubled relationship between Turkey and Israel that reached a breaking point in the wake of Israel's fatal raid on an aid flotilla that took the lives of nine individuals—eight Turks and one Turkish-American. Ankara's estrangement from Tel Aviv and the vitriol it aims at Israel generate problems, particularly in the US congress, as every instance of deterioration in relations engenders a reaction in that body. This reaction usually takes the form of a resolution to recognize the forced displacement and deaths of Ottoman Armenians in 1915 as genocide.

Contrary to appearances, though, Turkish-American relations are enjoying a second spring as Turkey tries to position itself as America's main ally in a very troubled region that is undergoing a profound transformation. The relative autonomy of Turkish foreign policy in the region, at a time when American influence, capacity, and resources are limited, indeed, generates some friction. However, the makers of Turkish foreign policy are fully aware that their regional aspirations are unlikely to be fulfilled without the assistance of Washington, or in spite of it. As Walter Russell Mead put it in a recent article:

On the whole, in spite of the inevitable clashes and disagreements, a greater Turkish presence in the Middle East will likely be welcome in Washington.... Turkey can help restore that balance, something that would ultimately let the US shrink its Middle Eastern footprint without compromising vital interests.

Turkey, on the other hand, is likely to benefit from Washington's tacit support—especially if the relationship is not too public and it doesn't look as if Washington rather than Ankara is running the show... it looks as if their shared interests lead the US and Turkey to update and renegotiate their sixty year old partnership in a changing region.<sup>5</sup>

#### THE STORY OF THE PAST

The changes that marked the end of the Cold War dramatically altered the strategic calculus of the western security system. Global developments in the context of post-September 11 environment have further transformed the security perceptions of the key actors in the international arena. Thus, the radical change in the source and nature of threats gave way to Turkey's search for a new role, strategy, and set of policies, particularly towards its neighbourhood. In the second decade of the post-Cold war era and in the wake of the September 11 attacks and the American misadventure in Iraq, Turkey's regional strategic profile has risen considerably, and its foreign policy has tried to carve a zone of autonomous action.

Turkey had been a staunch ally of the United States and a NATO member throughout the Cold War era. Hence, from the beginning, Turkish-American relations were defined mainly, if not exclusively, along security

<sup>5</sup> Walter Russel Mead, "Erdoğan's big fat Turkish idea," *American Interest*, 17 August 2011, [www.the-american-interest.com](http://www.the-american-interest.com).

lines. As a result, the strongest institutional link between the two countries was military. In time, the Pentagon and the Turkish general staff became each other's most reliable and trusted points of contact. As such, they were able to maintain relatively stable links and a healthy respect for one other even in times of serious difficulties in bilateral relations between the two countries.

Relations became more complicated after the end of the Cold War. With the disappearance of the Soviet threat, Turkey's geostrategic importance came under increasing scrutiny. The interests of the two partners diverged, as was to be expected between a global and a regional power in the absence of a well-defined common threat. Operations *Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm*, as well as the subsequent operation *Provide Comfort* in Iraq, made Turkey uncomfortable. Iraq's meaning for Americans and the Turks was altogether different and the tensions that would fully come to surface on the eve of the 2003 Iraq War were present throughout the 1990s. Still, both the first Iraq crisis and war, and the subsequent dissolution of Yugoslavia, along with the new geopolitics of post-Soviet Eurasia, recalibrated Turkey's strategic importance. The opening of the vast, energy-rich Caucasus and central Asia and the creation of independent states out of the ex-Soviet world helped raise Turkey's profile. The first discussions of Turkey as a "model" surfaced during this genesis period.

In the early 1990s, Turkey was concerned with the ultimate intentions of the US vis-à-vis the Kurds of Iraq. These were somewhat dissipated when the US delivered the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, who was then a guest at the Greek embassy in Nairobi, to a Turkish military team in Kenya in 1999. In some sense the delivery of Öcalan was the culmination of developments in American foreign policy, a brainchild of the late diplomat Richard Holbrooke that placed Turkey near the centre of a new strategic conceptualization. In short, this new perspective on Turkey, articulated in different times with fairly similar emphases by presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, valued the country as much for what it was as for where it was.

In Holbrooke's terminology, Turkey was the frontline state of the post-Cold War era. Since there was no imminent threat of war, its defining characteristics elevated Turkey to such a central role. From Morocco to Afghanistan, a vast region was defined by authoritarianism, resistance to globalization (both economically and politically), corruption, youth bulges, and increasingly its proclivity to generate violent Islamist radicalism. Almost at the centre of that area, close to the energy resources of the Caspian basin

as well as the Gulf, Turkey stood as a capitalist, secular, pluralist (if not yet totally democratic), Muslim country that was a member of the Atlantic alliance.

American efforts to open the door to Turkey's EU accession ought to be seen in the context of Washington's desire to see Ankara fully integrated in the transatlantic system as a bona fide democratic country. In view of Turkey's domestic developments during the first decade of the post-Cold War era, this latter attribute meant the integration of the Islamist movement fully into the political system and a resolution of Turkey's Kurdish problem by an extension of citizenship rights. Clinton, who said at the Turkish grand national assembly in 1999 that the 21st century would be largely shaped by the decisions that Turkey took, was the first president to articulate this thinking. Even Bush, whose administration had to face an embarrassing rejection by the Turkish parliament of permission to deploy American troops in Turkey to open a northern front, couldn't quite give up on Ankara. In fact, Bush's speech in Istanbul in 2004 was almost a replica of the one Clinton gave in 1999. The consistency of this approach, despite the real tensions and profound disagreements over Turkey's Syria and Iran policies, for instance, during the Bush years, culminated in Obama's declaration on an April 2009 visit to Ankara that the US and Turkey were in a "model partnership."

#### SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE IRAQ WAR

The period between al Qaeda's attacks against the United States on 11 September 2001 and the still-unfolding Arab revolts of 2010-11 brought dramatic changes to the international system and the Middle Eastern regional order. The cumulative effect of America's wars against Afghanistan and Iraq was a diminution of American power and prestige around the world. The financial burdens of the two wars and their political damage led the United States to begin a policy of gradual retrenchment. The war against Iraq in particular disrupted the fragile balances of the Middle Eastern regional system. The Arab state system collapsed under the weight of its fissures, its deepening legitimacy crisis, and its inability to deal with the need for change. To boot, the American war against Iraq had the unintended consequence of raising Iran's profile and making it not only the predominant regional power in the Persian Gulf but also potentially an eastern Mediterranean power due to its organic links to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Increasing Iranian influence also exacerbated Israeli apprehensions and anxieties about the Islamic republic, particularly because of its nuclear program.

Both September 11 and the Iraq War ultimately benefited Turkey too. If September 11 gave the world a taste of the jihadist dystopia, Turkey certainly stood as an antidote and an antithesis to it. Turkey's historically shaped characteristics provided an example to the world in general that another type of politics was possible, one that was neither the stagnant Arab Middle Eastern one, nor the messianic Iranian one, nor violence-worshipping jihadism. Soon, the ascent to power of the AKP, a party with an Islamist pedigree, would make the Turkish experiment even more of a shining example.

When the AKP came to power in 2002, many of the decision-makers in the Turkish state and among the public were vehemently opposed to the Iraq War. Although the AKP negotiated with the US to allow the deployment of American troops on its territory so that a northern front could be opened, the parliament ultimately rejected the government's decree. Turkish-American relations were thus severely bruised. This refusal, as well as the subsequent internment of Turkish special operations soldiers by American troops in the town of Suleimanieh in northern Iraq on 4 July 2003, were the flash points of the deterioration in relations and a source of anti-Americanism.

The truth is that Iraq, from the invasion of Kuwait and *Desert Storm* a decade earlier, was already a source of tension in bilateral relations. It crystallized the divergence of views between Turkey and the United States, or between the interests of an aspiring regional power and the global power, in the post-Cold War setting. It exacerbated on the Turkish side fears of an independent Kurdistan to the south of its border and raised suspicions of US connivance in that project.

Despite warmer relations in the second half of the 1990s, close cooperation to bring about the construction of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that turned Turkey into an energy transport route, and the celebration of a vaguely defined "special partnership," the two sides never really sorted out their potential disagreements. In the absence of a mutually agreed-upon framework for moving these relations forward, accidents could and ultimately did happen. As far as Turkey was concerned, the Iraq adventure of 2003 produced all the results that Ankara had warned Washington about. Turkey also had to face and deal with the mostly negative consequences of this expedition. In order to do so, Ankara took many initiatives even before the war began.

After the war, Ankara was unresponsive to American demands that it downgrade its relations with Iran, a member of the "axis of evil," and

Syria. On the other hand, Turkish cooperation with the US in Iraq continued despite great dissatisfaction with the level and quality of US help in fighting the separatist PKK. In the meantime, Turkish efforts to integrate the Sunnis into the political process, Ankara's ability to speak with all the Arab Iraqi parties, and its constructive initiatives for mediation gained the genuine appreciation of all concerned parties.

In fact, Turkish foreign policy became ever more active and the domestic developments favouring civilianization and democratization of the polity gradually loosened the grip the Turkish military had on devising policy towards Iraq and its Kurds in particular. The second Bush administration, after the appointment of Robert Gates as secretary of defense, started to modify America's approach towards Turkey. The most important sign of this change came at the conclusion of the critical meeting between Bush and Erdoğan in Washington on 5 November 2007. The president then called "the PKK an enemy of Iraq, Turkey and the US" and gave the green light for providing actionable intelligence to the Turkish military. Thereupon, Turkish policy towards Iraqi Kurds shifted dramatically. Economic integration and political cooperation with the Kurdistan regional government intensified. At the same time, the American, Turkish, and Iraqi governments also started a trilateral consultation and cooperation process to deal with the PKK. Thus far, however, given the reluctance of parties other than the Turks to take on the rebel group, the PKK is still a presence in northern Iraq, to the consternation of the Turkish government.

#### CHAMELEON DAYS

In the past decade, the Turkey that relied heavily on its hard power, that shunned the Middle East, and where the military called all the important shots, segued into a Turkey that was capable of deploying its soft power. It set an example of a country that could integrate its Islamists into the political system, continue its democratic practices, and show impressive economic growth. Arab citizens discovered Turkey in ever-growing numbers, just as Turkish TV series started to dominate primetime airwaves throughout the region. As Turkey's policy toward its neighbours gradually became less confrontational, the benefits of an alignment with Israel began to seem less impressive than before. In the meantime, the architect of that alignment on the Turkish side, the military, was fast losing political ground as a result of intensive civilianization of the polity. Many of its members were indicted for alleged coup plots and other illicit activities. Therefore, the Turkish-Israeli relationship needed new columns to stand on.

In its foreign policy, the AKP committed itself to the principle of “zero problems” with the neighbours, moved in to fill the power vacuum in the Middle East created with the failure of the United States’ war in Iraq, and volunteered its good offices for mediation in the longstanding conflicts of the region, particularly those that concerned Israel.<sup>6</sup> The problem was that the two countries had diverging visions for the Middle East and their policy preferences and approaches were increasingly irreconcilable. Turkey increasingly sees itself as a regional power and seeks to be America’s main partner in the region. Under the rubric of a model partnership, Ankara believes that it has a chance to forge a relationship that will inevitably come at the expense of Israel’s most-favoured status. Increasingly, a competition over strategic supremacy in eastern Mediterranean is surfacing between Tel Aviv and Ankara, which partially provides the background to the developments related to the flotilla raid and its aftermath. Turkey wishes to have a Middle Eastern regional order that is based on economic integration, political stability, and peace. Achieving peace is seen as the precondition of political stability and economic integration is expected to consolidate that stability. Ankara operates on the assumption that Israel’s current policies are blocking this path of regional integration.

The centrepiece of Turkey’s Middle East policy was Syria. The Turkish government gave cover to the Syrian regime at its most vulnerable when former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri of Lebanon was murdered and Damascus was suspected of masterminding the deed. Turkey put great energy, despite US objections, into brokering a Syrian-Israeli deal in 2008. Erdoğan’s fury in the wake of the Gaza war stemmed in part from the fact that the war killed an Israeli-Syrian agreement that the Turkish side believed was almost struck during Ehud Olmert’s visit to Ankara, just days before operation *Cast Lead*. Today, a similar fury is directed against President Bashar al-Assad of Syria for ignoring Turkish pleas to initiate reforms and stop killing its citizens. The Syrian opposition convened four times in Turkey, and Washington and Ankara are in regular contact to better synchronize their policy vis-à-vis Damascus.

Finally, not only did Turkey continue to engage Iran, despite criticism that Tehran uses these efforts to gain time for further nuclear enrichment, but Ankara also raised the issue of Israel’s nuclear arsenal in every platform. The decision of the 2010 nonproliferation treaty review conference that

6 On the basic outlines of recent Turkish foreign policy, see Kalin’s contribution to this issue.

invited Israel to open its nuclear program to scrutiny proved that Turkey's persistence on this matter paid off. The AKP government tried to engage Tehran in bilateral relations and to improve trade and investment. It pursued a line that was different than its western allies concerning Iran's nuclear program. It went so far as to broker a swap deal on nuclear fuel along with Brazil. Then Ankara voted against Iranian sanctions at the UN security council. That last move certainly irritated the Obama administration and subsequent developments suggest that the Turkish government has learned its lesson as well. At NATO's Lisbon summit in November 2010, Turkey subscribed to the missile shield project and in September of 2011 Turkey announced that in accordance with the decisions of the Lisbon summit it would host the radar system for the project.

In truth, Turkey's Iran policy is more complicated than meets the eye, as Ankara is in competition with Tehran for influence in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and, most importantly, Iraq. From that perspective, the official trip to Iraq by Erdoğan in March 2011 when he visited Najaf as a Sunni head of government, prayed at Ali's shrine, and paid a visit to Ayatollah Ali Sistani, assumes critical importance.

As the decade that enabled Turkey to seek and attain greater autonomy in its foreign policy choices came to a close, the Arab revolts fundamentally altered the strategic environment and the parties' calculations in the Middle East. During that decade, Turkey benefited from a more "benign environment," as Lesser writes. In that environment, benefiting from the legitimacy crises of the Arab regimes, the ascent of Iran, and Turkey's unavoidable position as that country's balancer, Ankara had many opportunities for activism in the Middle East and elsewhere. The expanding energy of Turkey's burgeoning entrepreneurial classes also pushed the AKP government to pursue a policy of economic integration and to lay the foundation of a Middle Eastern liberal economic zone. The trick was that Ankara banked on the established regimes to pursue its policies of engagement. That order has now collapsed.

Ankara was quicker than most of its allies and others to see the historical breakthrough of the revolts ignited by Muhammad Bouazzizi in Tunisia. Although slow to register the historical import of the Tunisian developments at first, Ankara supported the demands of the public and, spectacularly, addressing the crowds in Tahrir Square directly, Erdoğan demanded the departure of Hosni Mubarak. Such clairvoyance was, alas, absent when the Libyan situation evolved towards civil war. At first Turkey rightly kept in contact with the Qaddafi government so as not to jeopardize the lives of 25,000 Turkish citizens working in that country in various contracting

projects. Once their evacuation was completed, Erdoğan first questioned the right of NATO to intervene in Libya but within a fortnight sent four frigates to join the quarantine against Libya.

Nowhere was the failure of Turkey's "constructive engagement" policy more evident than in Syria. Ankara took great risks and defied Washington in engaging and at times, as in the aftermath of the murder of Hariri, covering for the Baathist regime. It worked hard to get proximity talks started between Damascus and Tel Aviv and almost brokered an agreement for direct talks. The two countries' trade increased severalfold and there were even joint cabinet meetings. The development of such intimate relations gave the Turkish government the sense of having more influence in affecting regime behaviour than was warranted. The hard truth came out in full force when, despite eight months of tireless efforts to persuade the Assad regime to accommodate the demands of the Syrian population, Turkey reached a dead end.

But the AKP's and its kindred organizations' links to some opposition movements in the region will place Turkey in a comfortable position to adjust to the new political realities. In all the countries where governments have been toppled, Turkey's ruling party had longstanding relations with the Islamic opposition. Therefore, once the government took the decision to side with the rebels against their repressive regimes, it was well positioned to make the shift and nurture deeper relations with the future rulers of these countries. Erdoğan's popularity among the Arab publics, mainly due to his hard position towards Israel but also because of his legitimacy as a democratically elected leader, also played to Turkey's advantage.

As the Arab world goes through convulsions that are likely to last a long time, and the US shifts its strategic attention towards Asia, the partnership between Ankara and Washington will become ever more critical. The US administration does recognize Turkey's potential role and supports the main tenets of its foreign policy. As the period of American retrenchment begins, Washington will seek to work more closely with reliable allies in regions where it still has important interests. Turkey is one such partner, both in geostrategic and in politico-cultural terms, not to mention its importance as an energy route and possibly a hub, and a growing market and potential trade and investment centre.

In the wake of the American withdrawal from Iraq, Turkey's positions and policies will be an important factor in whether or not that country will remain united and, if it does, whether or not Iranian influence over Baghdad will be balanced. On Syria, Washington and Ankara seek regime

change but wish to avoid a sectarian civil war. On Iran, even though the goal of not having a nuclear armed Iran is dear to both, Turkey's approach to dealing with Iran is more dialogue-oriented than Washington's. An attack against Iranian nuclear facilities by either the United States or Israel could potentially damage the newfound harmony between the two allies.

One final note pertains to a pattern that defined Turkish-American relations during the Cold War. When Turkey's strategic importance for the United States rose in the past, Washington's attention to the quality of Turkish democracy waned. Today, as Turkey's historically unique experiment to build an open society reaches a new crossroads, it would be a pity if Washington sacrificed Turkish democracy, once more, on the altar of strategic expediency.