

TURKEY: THE ALMOST MEDIATOR STATE

Most analysts consider Davutoğlu’s “zero problems with neighbors” strategy a failure, and typically cite Turkey’s decision to lend its support to religious conservative movements like the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring as a primary example. However, the failures of the last few years must also be understood within the framework of a larger narrative where Turkey has insisted on functioning as an intermediary between Israel and Syria, and the United States and Iran. These episodes, during which Turkey overstepped the boundaries of its influence, revealed the limitations of Turkish foreign policy and foreshadowed its regional decline.

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In November 2008, just a few days following Barack Obama's historic electoral victory, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave an interview to the *New York Times* during which he expressed his belief that with a new president there existed a fresh opportunity for the US to reconcile with Iran. Erdoğan proposed that Turkey arbitrate over negotiations between the superpower and the Islamic Republic. "We are ready to be the mediator," Erdoğan said, "I do believe we could be very useful."¹ He later reiterated these comments during an address at Columbia University.

Still in office, the Bush administration promptly rebuffed Turkey's overtures. "There's already a potential process in place for the Iranians, should they choose to accept it," State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack said.² Another Western official cautioned against Turkish arbitration, "They [the Turks] know that being a mediator between the West and Iran is really risky... it's going to put them in the wrong place."³

The overture was a bold move by a country and a leader on the rise. Starting in 2002, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) had successfully resurrected a state mired in economic crisis, and by 2008 had transformed Turkey into a top-20 economy. Similarly, reforms passed by the AKP jumpstarted accession talks with the EU.

But the most visible alteration was Turkey's foreign policy strategy. Premised on the academic work of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the professor-turned-politician who has since become the country's premier, Turkey's new "zero problems with neighbors" doctrine endorsed a "balanced approach towards all global and regional actors" and "strong linkages with all regional states."⁴ According to Sakarya University scholars Murat Yeşiltaş and Ali Balçı, this demanded a "proactive" and "preemptive" foreign policy approach.⁵ In order for this to be achieved, Davutoğlu argued that Turkey would have to come to terms with its Ottoman and Islamic heritage and become a model democratic-Muslim state, while still retaining its positive relationship with the West. Davutoğlu believed that the age of nationalism and illegitimate governance in the Middle East was coming to an end and would soon be replaced by an

1 Sabrina Tavernise, "Turkish Leader Volunteers to Be U.S.-Iran Mediator," *The New York Times*, 11 November 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/12/world/europe/12turkey.html>

2 "U.S. cold to Turkish mediation with Iran," *Hürriyet*, 2008, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10408187.asp?scr=1>

3 Tavernise (2008).

4 Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (November 2006), p. 953.

5 Murat Yeşiltaş and Ali Balçı, "A Dictionary of Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Party Era: A Conceptual Map," *Bilgi: Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2011), pp. 9-35.

era of religious conservative leadership looking to Turkey for inspiration – a theory derided at the time by Kemalists. Both he and Erdoğan hoped this approach would allow Turkey to expand its regional influence, and function as a mediator between Western and Middle Eastern actors. By the time Obama took his first steps in the Oval Office, Turkey was not only a member of the G-20 and NATO – it had also acquired a non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

In hindsight, the concerns of the Bush administration were telling. Most analysts today consider Davutoğlu’s “zero problems” strategy a failure, and typically cite Turkey’s decision to lend its support to religious conservative movements like the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring as a primary example. However, the failure of “zero problems” must also be understood within the framework of a larger narrative where Turkey insisted on functioning as an intermediary between Israel and Syria, and the United States and Iran. These episodes, during which Turkey overstepped the boundaries of its influence, revealed the limitations of Turkish foreign policy and foreshadowed its regional decline.

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Opportunity and Betrayal

Mediating between Israel and Syria was a signature moment for Turkey’s “zero problems” policy. Ankara and Jerusalem shared a longstanding strategic partnership that under the AKP included some historic diplomatic achievements: organized by the Turks in 2005, Israeli and Pakistani foreign ministers met for the first time, and in 2007 Israeli president Shimon Peres and Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas delivered adjacent speeches to Turkish Parliament.⁶ However, the impetus to reconcile Israel and Syria only crystallized after Ankara experienced a warming of ties upon the succession of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad by his son Bashar in 2004. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu hoped secret talks would convince Assad and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to engage in direct negotiations under the supervision of the United States, something that would serve Turkish strategic interests and score the AKP international accolades.

6 Steven Erlanger and Salman Masood, “‘Historic’ Meeting for Israel and Pakistan,” *The New York Times*, 2 September 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/02/international/middleeast/02mideast.html?_r=0

The US initially opposed the endeavor; from the perspective of the Bush administration, negotiations rewarded an Iranian ally who instigated regional instability by supplying arms to Hezbollah and serving as a base of operations for Hamas and Islamic Jihad. It was believed that Syrian agents were responsible for the 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. However, Israel managed to adequately convince the White House that a final settlement – made possible with American incentives – would pull Syria out of Iran’s orbit. On 28 May 2008, a joint Syrian-Turkish-Israeli statement announced that, with the intention of reaching “a comprehensive peace,” the countries declared “their intent to conduct these talks in good faith and with an open mind.”⁷

Between May and August, four rounds of meetings between Israeli representatives Shalom Turjeman and Yoram Trubovitz and their Syrian counterpart Riyad Dawudi took place in Istanbul and Ankara. The Turkish mediator shuttled back and forth between the two parties; negotiators neither met face to face nor shared the same hotel.⁸

Within six months negotiations had already stalled. Entangled in a corruption scandal that threatened to end his political career, Olmert effectively became a lame duck prime minister in September 2008.⁹ None of his potential replacements publicly supported talks with Syria. With practically one foot out of office and his country on the brink of open conflict with Hamas, Olmert accepted an invitation from Erdogan to visit Ankara in late December 2008 with the intention of drawing up some kind of draft agreement from the negotiations.¹⁰ For over four hours, the two leaders sat in Erdogan’s official residence and poured over details with Assad over the telephone. According to a Turkish source, the parties were prepared to announce that they were ready for direct negotiations: “the joint Syrian-Israeli statement was nearly finished and needed only a few corrected words to be completed.”¹¹ Alon Liel, former director-general of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Israeli chargé d’affaires to Turkey, called it a “productive exchange.”¹²

But four days later, Israel launched a military operation to curtail Hamas aggression, and the negotiations quickly came undone. Statements from Damascus and Ankara lambasted the Israeli operation. “Despite the calls to stop attacks, Israeli officials’ statements that operations will last a long time and are in fact open-ended,

7 “Syria, Israel launch peace talks under Turkey’s auspices,” *Hürriyet*, 29 May 2008, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/turkey/8991018.asp>

8 Ofra Bengio, “Altercating Interests and Orientations between Israel and Turkey: A View from Israel,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2009), pp.43-55.

9 In March 2014, Olmert was convicted of two counts of bribery.

10 Turkey hosted Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal in February 2006 despite Israeli and American protest.

11 “Week before Gaza op, Israel and Syria were ready for talks,” *Ha’aretz*, 13 February 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/week-before-gaza-op-israel-and-syria-were-ready-for-direct-talks-1.270062>

12 Alon Liel, “Israeli–Turkish Relations under Strain,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2010), pp.23–26.

constitute a serious crime against humanity,” Erdoğan said during an AKP meeting on 27 December 2008. “I consider these actions by Israel, while we are making an attempt for peace, as delivering a blow to the peace initiatives.”¹³ Following the premier’s lead, Turkey’s media ramped up its anti-Israel rhetoric. Huge demonstrations crowded the streets of Istanbul and Ankara.

For Erdoğan, Olmert’s decision to visit Ankara, when he knew full well that the military operation would derail talks, was unforgivable. “He had taken a personal risk. He felt betrayed,” one Turkish official said of his prime minister.¹⁴ Rather than salvage the remains however, Erdoğan went on the offensive. Sitting on a panel with Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 29 January 2009, Erdoğan excoriated Israel’s actions in Gaza. Despite repeated attempts by the American moderator to end the session, Turkey’s prime minister would not be refused the final word. “When it comes to killing, you know well how to kill,” he told Peres.¹⁵

Praised across the Middle East, and perhaps most importantly at home, Erdoğan returned from Davos a defiant hero. Yet after such an unvarnished display of emotion, a preventable blow had been delivered to the “zero problems” policy. The impact of Erdoğan’s outburst would be felt well beyond the region; disturbed by the manner in which the Turkish premier dismissed his country’s relationship with Israel, officials in Washington and Brussels began to seriously question whether Davos was a one-off event, or a sign that Ankara was shifting away from the West. With this background how would Turkey reestablish itself as an “honest broker”?

Doubling Down

Sworn into office on 20 January 2009, the aftermath of Davos became Obama’s first foreign policy challenge. Israel and Turkey, crucial American allies, now felt a mutual distrust. Consequently, the new US administration’s Middle East strategy would be working with only half a deck.

Regardless of its dispute with Israel however, Turkey remained a key role player in the eyes of the Obama administration. During his first visit to Turkey in April 2009, Obama called Erdoğan a “personal friend” and told Parliament that “Turkey’s greatness lies in your ability to be at the center of things. This is not where East and West divide – this is where they come together.” Washington was convinced, perhaps by

13 “Turkish PM Erdoğan slams Israel,” *Hürriyet*, December 2008, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10659399.asp?scr=1>

14 “Israel-Turkey bottom line: mutual dependence,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 1 January 2010, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=israel-turkey-bottom-line-mutual-dependence-2010-01-08>

15 “Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel,” *The New York Times*, 29 January 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html>

Erdogan's previous offers, that Ankara could assist in the effort to contain Iran's nuclear program – the dominant issue in American foreign policy. Turkey, Obama concluded, possessed "insights into a whole host of regional and strategic challenges that we may face."¹⁶

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(UNSC) proceeded to deliver a new sanctions resolution.

For Turkey and Brazil, it was a race against time. They lobbied the US to delay the resolution, but it only served to plant doubts in the minds of Washington policymakers as to the intentions of these secondary negotiators. Erdogan and Lula began to receive mixed messages from the White House.

There was a general shock when the two parties returned in May with an apparent breakthrough.¹⁷ A joint declaration by Turkey, Brazil, and Iran "stipulated that 20-percent-enriched nuclear fuel was to be provided to Iran for its use in the Tehran Research Reactor, which produces medical isotopes, in exchange for the removal of 1,200 kilograms of 3.5-percent-low-enriched uranium to Turkey."¹⁸ Davutoğlu said the agreement "demonstrated once again that resolution could be reached through diplomacy."¹⁹

The announcement came just a day before the UNSC forwarded a draft resolution for sanctions on Iran – a clear indication of how little faith the US placed in the Turkish and Brazilian channels – and was portrayed by Western media as an attempt by "rising powers on the world stage" to undermine the efforts of the P5+1 (the permanent five

¹⁶ "Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament," *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*, 6 April 2009, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Obama-To-The-Turkish-Parliament/

¹⁷ Trita Parsi, "The Turkey-Brazil Deal: Can Washington take 'yes' for an answer?" *Foreign Policy*, 18 May 2010, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/18/the-turkey-brazil-iran-deal-can-washington-take-yes-for-an-answer/>

¹⁸ Aylin Gürzel, "Turkey's Role in Defusing the Iranian Nuclear Issue," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer 2012), pp.141-152.

¹⁹ "Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Iran and Brazil," *Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 17 May 2010, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/17_05_2010-joint-declaration-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-turkey_-iran-and-brazil_.en.mfa

members of the UNSC plus Germany).²⁰ “We don’t believe it was any accident that Iran agreed to this declaration as we were preparing to move forward in New York,” US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said. The US, and the rest of the UNSC, forcefully rejected the Tehran Declaration, arguing that it failed to address the continued enrichment of uranium inside Iranian territory and lacked clauses that would increase the nuclear program’s transparency.²¹ British Foreign Secretary William Hague asserted that Iran’s acceptance of the declaration “may just be a delaying tactic,” and French Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valero added that “a solution to the fuel question (...) would do nothing to settle the problem posed by the Iranian nuclear program.”²²

Turkey and Brazil insisted that the world powers give the stipulations in the declaration an opportunity to work, but US officials countered that the two mediating countries were never asked to negotiate on their behalf.²³ On 9 June 2010, the UNSC voted in favor of a sanctions regime. Turkey and Brazil were the only countries to oppose the measure.²⁴

Instead of proving Turkey’s quality as a mediator, the Tehran Declaration positioned Ankara and Washington at loggerheads. Some American analysts argued that the Obama administration should never have given such responsibility to a country so dependent on Iranian trade and energy: sanctions on Iran would negatively impact Turkey’s economy, and therefore it could never function as an impartial actor. Others went a step further, claiming that the episode was yet another example of Turkey trying to distance itself from the West. Many characterized the Turkish-Brazilian initiative as simply naïve.

Naturally, Turkey had its own interests in securing the terms of a deal. As posited by Aylin Gürzel, a professor at Eastern Mediterranean University, Turkey “was trying

20 “Clinton attacks Turkey-Brazil deal with Iran,” *Financial Times*, 18 May 2010, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/58caa4b4-62a4-11df-b1d1-00144feab49a.html#axzz3Xlx0LYok>

21 Trita Parsi, “The Turkey-Brazil Deal: Can Washington take ‘yes’ for an answer?” *Foreign Policy*, 18 May 2010, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/18/the-turkey-brazil-iran-deal-can-washington-take-yes-for-an-answer/>

22 “West makes nuclear offer, but West unconvinced,” *Reuters*, 17 May 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/05/17/us-iran-nuclear-idUSTRE64G18A20100517>

23 “Brazil, Turkey Broker Fuel Swap With Iran,” *Arms Control Today*, 4 June 2010, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_06/FuelSwap

24 One non-permanent member of the UNSC, Lebanon, chose to abstain.

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summarized by Celso Amorim, Brazilian foreign minister at the time of the Tehran Declaration, “the fact that Brazil and Turkey ventured into a subject that would be typically handled by the P5+1 and, more importantly, were successful in doing so – disturbed the status quo.”²⁶

Conclusion

Following these two attempts at mediation, Turkey witnessed a rapid decline in global prominence. Punctuated by the unfortunate 2010 Israeli raid on the *Mavi Marmara*, Turkish-Israeli diplomatic relations collapsed.²⁷ Erdoğan, compensating for the loss, mistakenly embraced Assad and Hamas: the former turned out to be a dictator who, since 2011, Turkey has actively sought to remove from power, and the latter is still listed as a terrorist organization by the US and the EU. He also increased his denunciation of Israel, often blurring the lines between fair criticism and anti-Semitic rhetoric. Such unpalatable behavior damaged Turkey’s reputation in the West, and there is no empirical evidence that it has boosted the AKP’s election results over the years.²⁸

Ties with the US have also suffered, and are only in a marginally better place in comparison to those with Israel. Erdoğan’s friendship with Obama has visibly withered and US officials increasingly express concern about Turkey’s democracy and its commitment to regional stability. Reports that Turkey exposed the activities of Israeli intelligence personnel to Iran in 2013, replaced Syria as a hub for Hamas operations, turned a blind eye to the activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and is supporting radical insurgents in Libya have done little to ease American apprehensions. All things considered, Turkey’s public image stands in

25 Gürzel (2012), p.142.

26 Celso Amorim, “Let’s Hear From the New Kids on the Block,” *The New York Times*, 14 June 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/15/opinion/15ihetedamorim.html?ref%03global.&gwh=6A0614C0F0DCAB91F9182CB8306E-003F&gwt=pay&assetType=opinion>

27 Obama attempted to resolve the dispute between Turkey and Israel in March 2013, but after Erdoğan used the Netanyahu apology to further belittle Israel the US decided not to intervene further.

28 Gabriel Mitchell, “What is the role of Israel in Turkey’s political universe? A Q&A with Dr. Emre Erdoğan,” *Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, August 2014.

to defend the autonomy of non-nuclear weapons states to enrich uranium for domestic energy production.”²⁵ The AKP leadership also believed that independently negotiating with Iran would contribute to the improvement of its reputation as a mediator, while keeping a lid on the Islamic Republic’s regional advances. However, as perfectly

stark contrast to where it was in January 2009 – before talks between Israel and Syria collapsed and Erdoğan stormed off the stage in Davos.

There are two lessons than can be derived from this review. First, the “zero problems” policy should have only been applied to Turkey’s relationship with its neighbors, and not the relationships between Turkish neighbors or relations between various actors in neighboring states. Turkey possesses neither the carrots nor the sticks to be a suitable mediator in those scenarios. More importantly, the affairs of countries in Turkey’s immediate neighborhood have too critical an impact on Turkey’s own fortunes for it to be considered an unbiased third party. At best, it can facilitate an exchange between disputing parties under limited circumstances. This overextension of Turkish diplomacy came at a serious price. Second, while conceptually the notion of Turkish exceptionalism has found a place in Western political hyperbole, in reality Turkey is ill suited to function as a mediator between Western and Middle Eastern interests.

If Turkey is committed to reframing its foreign policy, particular attention should be given to repairing ties with Israel and the US. In the case of Israel, this can only happen if Turkish leadership represses the anti-Semitic rhetoric that has become so ubiquitous in recent years. Measures to facilitate intra-Palestinian reconciliation would also be a welcomed step in Jerusalem. Improving relations with the US will require assurances that Ankara will support American policy vis-à-vis Iran and ISIL. Such decisions would significantly improve Turkey’s regional standing. But above all, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu must abandon the dream of Turkey as a mediator in global affairs, and re-dedicate themselves to settling their own country’s numerous international disputes.