Turkey and the Arab Spring

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last decade, Turkey’s pragmatic “zero-problems” foreign policy resulted in better relations and trade with its Middle Eastern neighbours. However, with the upheavals of the Arab Spring, Turkey’s relations with Israel at an all-time low, the country’s belated public support for the revolution in Syria and an escalation of the Cyprus–European Union (EU) issue, it is questionable whether this “zero problems” policy is still relevant or workable.

The lack of consistency in Turkey’s responses to the revolutions and regarding the ongoing statelessness of the Kurds and the Palestinians belies Prime Minister Erdoğan’s commitment to a moral foreign policy. Amid concerns that Turkey is abandoning its long-standing commitment to the West, Turkey’s current relations with Israel, Egypt, Syria and the EU demonstrate far-reaching regional and international ambitions.

Israel/Palestine

◊ Tensions between the Turkey and Israel increased sharply last month following the United Nations Palmer Report into the Israel Defence Force (IDF) raid on the Gaza flotilla in May 2010, during which nine Turks were killed.
◊ In September 2011, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu reiterated that without a formal apology and compensation to the families of the deceased, Turkish-Israeli relations “would not be normalised”.
◊ Turkey’s increasingly aggressive attitude toward Israel appears designed to increase its regional popularity – during Erdoğan’s “Arab Spring Tour” he asserted Turkey as a regional power-broker, a defender of moral foreign policy and champion of Palestinian self-determination.
◊ Erdoğan’s closeness to Hamas and the Turkish charity IHH that organized the Gaza flotilla, designated by Israel for terrorist connections, as well as his on-going oppression of Turkey’s Kurdish population, cast doubts over the sincerity of Erdoğan’s promotion of Palestinian self-determination.

Egypt

◊ Turkey is openly seeking to build a regional partnership with Egypt, with the goal of establishing a new axis of power in the Middle East in the midst of the power vacuum created by the Arab Spring and as United States (US) influence in the region is waning.
◊ Grounded in Turkish economic investment in post-Mubarak Egypt, the partnership is a stepping stone to regional – and international – power.
◊ Turkey’s gestures towards Egypt come at a time when Egypt’s political direction remains unclear, particularly regarding its future relations with Israel and the US.
◊ Erdoğan’s public criticism of Israel at the Arab League in Cairo in September 2011 was favourably compared by Egypt’s national press to the muted actions of Egypt’s ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in response to Israeli incursions into the Sinai Peninsula in August 2011, during which six Egyptian border guards were shot and killed.
◊ Erdoğan’s speech was well received by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist party now expected to win a large share of votes in Egypt’s upcoming elections.

Syria

◊ Turkey’s initial response to the Syrian uprising was muted – in stark contrast to Erdoğan’s immediate calls for regime change in Egypt, where Turkey called on Mubarak to go before the US did, and Turkey’s involvement in the no-fly zone in Libya.
In August – when the death toll in Syria had exceeded 2,200 – Turkey was promoting dialogue with President Assad's regime and internal reform. However, as the international community united in calls for Assad to go, Turkey relented, this month saying it would impose its own sanctions on Syria.

Erdoğan's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) is promoting the Muslim Brotherhood within the Syrian opposition: the Syrian National Council was prematurely announced, allegedly by secular young Syrian activists in an attempt to stop "the AKP trying to make their revolution a Muslim Brotherhood-led affair".

Erdoğan's credibility among the Syrian opposition is diminishing amid allegations that Turkey handed a rebel Syrian officer back to the Assad regime. Turkey's prior closeness to the regime, which it had argued could precipitate reform, has given way to inaction, wilful or otherwise.

European Union

Turkey entered into a customs union with the EU in 1996 and negotiations for entry into the EU began in 2005. However, with the Eurozone in status and Turkey's economy and regional clout growing, relations with the EU are worsening.

Turkey's domestic human rights record, its inability to resolve the Kurdish issue as well opposition from other European members has virtually stalled its bid to join the EU – no progress has been made in the last year.

EU peace talks regarding Cyprus have faltered, and Turkey publicly threatened Cyprus with a naval presence following a disagreement over gas exploration in the Mediterranean.

European politicians are divided over Turkey's recent criticism of Israel. While some claim it will negatively impact on accession talks and damage relations, others express sympathy over Israel's refusal to compromise over Turkey's demands.
Turkey and the Arab Spring

Situated at the interstices of Europe and the Middle East, Turkey has a unique and changing role in both regions. Despite long-standing allegiances to the West, during the last decade – dominated by the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its charismatic leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – Turkey has witnessed growing trade and relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours, significant economic growth, and apparent growing appetite for combative international affairs.

The mass uprisings that swept the Middle East and North Africa this year caught the world by surprise. Despite lacking consistency in its responses to the revolutions, Muslim-majority Turkey has taken the opportunity to assert itself as a regional and an international leader. This briefing will examine Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring, analysing its relationships with Israel, Egypt and Syria, as well as with the European Union (EU).

Background

Under the AKP, Turkey’s pragmatic and inclusive foreign policy resulted in better relations and increased bilateral trade with its neighbours and in Middle East, including Iran. Known as “zero-problems”, the policy – designed by Erdoğan’s former special advisor, current Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu1 – was extremely successful.

As Turkey’s economy grew so did its regional ambitions: for example, Turkey attempted to broker peace negotiations between Israel and Syria in 2008, halted abruptly by Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in January 2009. “Erdoğan wants to be remembered as the man who made Turkey a global power,” claimed Henri Barkey of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington in an interview this summer. “And he wants to prove to the world that you can be a global player and a Muslim at the same time”.2 Domestically, however, there are issues that may prevent this from coming to pass. Despite the AKP’s popularity, analysts anticipate political tensions partly due to suspicion from “secular-nationalist elites” and the military, and partly in response to increased terrorist attacks from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).3 Similarly, despite claims that Turkey serves as a model of modern, democratic yet Islamist governance, there are notable barriers to genuine pluralism and freedoms. The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index ranks Turkey 89th of 167 countries, noting deterioration in its media freedoms between 2008 and 2010;4 the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) says Turkey’s Internet Law “considerably limits freedom of expression;” and Reporters Without Borders considers it a “country under surveillance” on a par with Russia.5

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey increasingly looked to the West, becoming a member of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

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1 Ahmet Davutoğlu CV, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at http://www.mfa.gov.tr/ahmet-davutoğlu.en.mfa


3 While the Arab Spring raged in Syria in July of this year, the PKK launched a number of attacks to which the government responded with force. See ‘Government promises tougher stance after PKK attacks’, Economist Intelligence Unit, 1 September 2011.


(NATO) in 1952 and the Council of Europe in 1949. It has had a customs union with the EU since 1996 and negotiations for entry into the EU started in 2005. However, Turkey’s domestic human rights record and its inability to resolve the Kurdish problem – as well as the recently inflamed Cyprus issue and opposition from other European members – has virtually stalled its bid to join the EU.6

While some conclude that Turkey’s strengthening relations with other Muslim-majority countries is a direct result of AKP’s Islamist outlook, others argue that this is primarily a pragmatic policy and in part a reaction to apparent European reluctance to admit Turkey to the EU. In the wake of the Arab Spring with Turkey’s relations with Israel at an all-time low, an escalation of the Cyprus issue and Turkey’s belated public support for the revolution in Syria, there are many - both in Turkey and without – asking whether this “zero problems” policy is still relevant or workable.7

Turkey responded strongly to Israel’s Cast Lead operation in Gaza in January 2009 — not least because an between Syria and Israel, Turkey had obtained assurances that Israel would not respond militarily to increased Hamas rocket attacks on southern Israel. Negotiations facilitated by Turkey were halted abruptly; and during a panel discussion at the Davos economic summit in 2009, Erdoğan accused the Israeli President Shimon Peres of “knowing how to kill children well” before walking off the stage.8

Turkey – country profile and factsheet, Economist Intelligence Unit, updated 1 September 2011, available at http://country.eiu.com/Turkey

Ibid

The Mavi Marmana (AP)

Relations have deteriorated sharply since the publication in September 2011 of the United Nations (UN) Palmer report into the 2010 flotilla. It was hoped the report would enable reconciliation between the two countries; but in reality it has had the opposite effect – arguably because it fails to apportion clear blame to either side. On 2 September, Davutoğlu

Israel / Palestine

Turkish-Israeli relations are perhaps the most volatile of its foreign policy portfolio. Tensions between the two states reached a fevered impasse last month following Israel’s refusal to apologise for the killing of eight Turkish citizens and one Turk with a United States (US) passport on board the Mavi Marmara ship, which occurred during the Israel Defence Force (IDF) raid on the Gaza flotilla in May 2010.

Erdoğan’s increasingly aggressive attitude toward Israel — which once considered Turkey a close ally – has not only increased the Turkish Prime Minister’s regional popularity, but also cements the impression that Turkey considers itself a regional leader, independent of Tel Aviv or Washington.

6 Turkey – country profile and factsheet, Economist Intelligence Unit, updated 1 September 2011, available at http://country.eiu.com/Turkey


9 Ibid
held a press conference in response to the report. He outlined Turkey’s satisfaction that Israel was found to have failed to provide the commission with a satisfactory explanation for the deaths; that the force used during the raid was found to be excessive and unreasonable; and that after the raid Israeli authorities mistreated passengers awaiting deportation. He also stated his country’s disappointment that the report had concluded that the blockade of Gaza is a legitimate way to prevent weapons from entering the region, and that it was described as a legal exception under international law to the principle of free maritime movement.

Warning that “no state is above the law,” Davutoğlu said that Israel had violated both international law and “the conscience of humanity”. He reiterated that without a formal apology and compensation to the families of the deceased, “Turkish-Israeli relations would not be normalised”. He made reference to a previous agreement with Israel on the issue, but claimed that a combination of deliberate delays to the UN commission and internal “disagreements within the Israeli Council of Ministers” prevented the agreement from being implemented. Announcing the measures Turkey would take in response, Davutoğlu heaped opprobrium on Israel: “the time has come for [Israel] to pay a price for its actions. This price is, above all, deprivation of Turkey’s friendship.” Retaliatory measures included: downgrading of diplomatic relations (including the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador); the suspension of military cooperation; and promises to refer the blockade to the International Court of Justice.

Ten days later, Erdoğan began his so-called “Arab Spring Tour” of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, using the opportunity to cement Turkey’s standing as regional player, particularly vis-à-vis Israel. Addressing members of the Arab League in Cairo, Erdoğan said “It is time for us to take responsibility for our common future [...] we are entitled to meet the righteous demands of our people using any legitimate means.” Erdoğan reiterated that his country would not resume normal relations with Israel until the latter had

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11 Press statement by H.E. Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, regarding Turkish-Israeli relations, 2 September 2011

12 Ibid

apologised and paid financial compensation for the raid.\(^\text{14}\)

Erdoğan used the Arab League platform to publicly campaign for UN recognition of Palestinian statehood: “recognition of the Palestinian state is the only correct way [...] it is not a choice but an obligation”.\(^\text{15}\) Erdoğan’s speech was a direct challenge to both Israel and the US, who oppose to the Palestinian Authority’s recent statehood bid claiming it undermines future peace negotiations. Davutoğlu used a press conference to strongly resist US mediation efforts with Israel, claiming “We do not need mediation [...] the demands of Turkey are clear”.\(^\text{16}\)

In Tunisia, Erdoğan advocated the Turkish model of governance: in advance of the Tunisian elections this month, he said that Islam and democracy were compatible and that Turkish secularism guarantees equality for people of all beliefs and none.\(^\text{17}\) He also increased his combative stance towards Israel, warning that he could deploy warships in the eastern Mediterranean if necessary. “Israel cannot do whatever it wants in the eastern Mediterranean,” he said during a press conference, “our navy attack ships can be there at any moment”.\(^\text{18}\)

Erdoğan’s threats intensified amid heightened proposed plans by Israel and Cyprus to explore offshore gas fields in the area, to which Turkey – which recognises only the Turkish Cypriot north of Cyprus – objects.\(^\text{19}\) On 18 September, Davutoğlu further revealed that Ankara had previously threatened to veto an Israeli request to open NATO office in Brussels.\(^\text{20}\) Davutoğlu told news broadcaster CCN the US had helped Israel lobby to open a Mediterranean Dialogue Initiative office earlier this year, but that Turkish officials had threatened to veto it during a meeting in Berlin in April.\(^\text{21}\)

Israel’s official response to the threats was muted: “we think that Israel’s relations with Turkey, heretofore good, are important, and we are not commenting on this or that statement”.\(^\text{22}\) However, an anonymous official told the Israeli press: “We’ll let Erdoğan lash out some more. Israel has no intention of escalating the situation further, and the person doing this is Erdoğan. His statements are a bully’s slogans.”\(^\text{23}\)

It has been suggested that Erdoğan is using the flotilla incident to increase his popularity within the Middle East; and some are sceptical of AKP involvement with the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedom and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), the Turkish charity that organized the flotilla. IHH is a constituent organisation of the Union of Good, an international umbrella organisation for Hamas-linked charities operating in Gaza and the West Bank designated by the US Treasury in 2009.\(^\text{24}\) The Union of Good was proscribed by Israel in February 2002, and in July 2008, the Israeli Defence Minister proscribed 36 members of the Union of Good, including IHH, which Israeli authorities claim is also “sympathetic to al-Qaeda”.\(^\text{25}\)

While the AKP officially banned its own members from participating in the 2010 flotilla, ranking AKP members are on the board of IHH; at the request of US officials, Erdoğan did, however, refuse to let the 2011 flotilla originate from Istanbul. Relevant findings from the

\(^{15}\) Ibid
\(^{16}\) ‘Turkey: We thwarted Israeli NATO request’, Y-net, 18 September 2011, available at http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4129353,00.html
\(^{17}\) ‘Turkey’s warships warning to Israel’, Reuters, 15 September 2011, available at www.arabnews.com/middleeast/article/022240.cee
\(^{19}\) ‘Turkey’s warships warning to Israel’, Reuters, 15 September 2011
\(^{20}\) ‘Turkey: We thwarted Israeli NATO request’, Y-net, 18 September 2011
\(^{21}\) Ibid
\(^{22}\) Turkey’s warships warning to Israel, Reuters, 15 September 2011
\(^{23}\) Erdoğan: Warships can be in E. Med at any moment, Y-net, 15 September 2011
Palmer report omitted from Davutoğlu’s response included the fact that the commission was satisfied that the flotilla was not a governmental initiative, but that the true intentions of the organizers, and especially those of the IHH, raised serious concerns, and led to an escalation that could have been avoided. AKP’s uncritical relationship with IHH, which comes at a time when Erdoğan is reaching out to Hamas, raises serious questions about what Davutoğlu called the “historic Turkish-Jewish friendship”.  

Davutoğlu states that Turkey’s foreign policy is morally motivated: “We in Turkey, we are the representatives of an understanding that advocates peace instead of eternal conflict and wants to establish justice instead of tyranny. Our foreign policy is based on this fundamental understanding.” However, there are many who suggest that Erdoğan’s loud promotion of the Palestinian cause contrasts starkly with his prejudicial treatment of Turkey’s Kurdish population, particularly cross-border raids in Iraq and the denial of Kurdish autonomy.

Egypt

Last month saw Turkey openly seeking to build a regional partnership with Egypt, with the potential goal of establishing a new axis of power in the Middle East in the midst of the power vacuum created by the Arab Spring. In an interview with the New York Times published on 19 September, Davutoğlu said: “this will not be an axis against any other country — not Israel, not Iran, not any other country, but this will be an axis of democracy, real democracy […] of the two biggest nations in our region, from the north to the south, from the Black Sea down to the Nile Valley in Sudan.”

The proposed partnership is to be grounded in economic cooperation. In the same week as

“Turkey-Egypt – hand in hand to the future” Egyptians welcome Erdoğan (World Bulletin)

Davutoğlu’s announcement, a delegation of Egyptian businessmen visited Turkey for the first time since the Egyptian uprising began. The head of the Egyptian-Turkish Business Council said the aim of the visit was to resume business bonds between the two countries and improve bilateral trade. Davutoğlu predicted that trade between the would grow from its current $3.5 billion to $5 billion in two years; and Zuhal Mansfield, head of Turkish-Egyptian Business Council at the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey, said: “we aim to reach a total trade volume of $10 billion in the next five years”.

Davutoğlu tried to downplay accusations that an alliance might engender rivalry: “some people may think Egypt and Turkey are competing. No. This is our strategic decision. We want a strong Egypt now.” Turkish investment in Egypt – economic as well as political – is likely motivated by a shrewd desire to take advantage of the vacuum of power in Egypt following the departure of former President Hosni Mubarak. Mansfield confirmed that while there were almost no

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26 Press statement by H.E. Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, regarding Turkish-Israeli relations, 2 September 2011

27 See for example ‘Is Turkey the best model for Arab democracy?’, Al Jazeera Opinion, 19 Sep 2011

28 ‘Davutoğlu to ‘NYT’: Ankara seeking Turkey-Egypt alliance,’ Jerusalem Post, 19 September 2011


30 ‘Davutoglu to ‘NYT’: Ankara seeking Turkey-Egypt alliance,’ Jerusalem Post, 19 September 2011

31 ‘Egyptians in Turkey for new business ties,’ Hürriyet Daily News, 19 September 2011

32 ‘Davutoğlu to ‘NYT’: Ankara seeking Turkey-Egypt alliance,’ Jerusalem Post, 19 September 2011
Turkish businessmen in Egypt five years ago, there has been close cooperation between the countries since the beginning of the revolution—a clear sign that the departure of Mubarak has opened up new possibilities for Turkish-Egyptian relations.\(^{33}\)

It is notable that Turkey's gestures towards Egypt have followed the collapse of a key US regional ally—Mubarak—and come at a time when Egypt's political direction remains unclear. The Egyptian leg of Erdoğan's “Arab Spring” tour in September was very well-received: on arrival he was greeted by crowds waving Egyptian, Libyan and Turkish flags, an indication of Turkey's stage-managed image of guiding the Arab Spring; crowds chanted slogans including “Egypt-Turkey: one fist” and “brave Erdoğan welcome to your second home.”\(^{34}\) His speech to the Arab league in Cairo engendered widespread Egyptian support: according to Mansfield, it was worth “more than thousands of compliments [for] Egypt-Turkey relations”\(^{35}\).

Erdoğan's words were also well received by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist party banned under Mubarak now expected to win a large share of votes in Egypt's upcoming elections. The crowds greeting the Turkish Prime Minister also waved flags of his Islamist AKP party. Aleh Hamudeh, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and associate professor at the Islamist-sympathetic Al-Azhar University, commented: “We like him and trust him. His fight for the Muslim people in Gaza will always be applauded by Egyptians.”\(^{36}\)

Others, however, feel that Erdoğan's criticism of Israel is merely a cynical populist measure. Criticism of Israel was certainly a crowd-pleaser: according to one report, “most of the cheers from the crowd came during his statements on Israel”.\(^{37}\) Retired Egyptian diplomat Nagui Elghatrifi, observed: “[Erdoğan] knows very well how to manipulate Egyptians' popular sentiments. This is very clever of him. He also touched on the Israeli issue in a very clever way. It is clear that the status of Turkey in the Arab world after Erdoğan's tour will be quite considerable.”\(^{38}\)

Erdoğan's strong words were favourably compared to the muted actions of Egypt's ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in response to Israeli incursions into the Sinai Peninsula in August 2011, during which six Egyptian border guards were killed. As Time magazine reported: “Enter the tough-talking Erdoğan, who recently tossed out Israel's ambassador to Turkey, suspended bilateral military ties and promised a Turkish military escort for vessels defying Israel's Gaza blockade in the future. As far as Egypt's public was concerned, Erdoğan had shown the SCAF (and everybody else) how it was done when it came to responding to Israeli actions, cementing his stature as the Arab world's new pasha.”\(^{39}\)

Regardless of whether Erdoğan is manipulating popular Arab support or trying to engender sympathy for an Islamist alliance, Turkey clearly sees the partnership as a stepping stone to increased regional – and international – power.

**Syria**

Despite nearly going to war with each other in 1998 over the Syrian government's sheltering of the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, Turkey and Syria subsequently developed closer commercial and military ties. Between 2003 and 2011, Davutoğlu travelled to Syria more than 60 times,\(^{40}\) and trade

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\(^{33}\) 'Egyptians in Turkey for new business ties,' Hurriyet Daily News, 19 September 2011


\(^{35}\) 'Egyptians in Turkey for new business ties,' Hurriyet Daily News, 19 September 2011


\(^{37}\) Ibid

\(^{38}\) Ibid

\(^{39}\) 'Why Turkey's Erdogan Is Greeted like a Rock Star in Egypt,' Time Magazine, 13 September, available at http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2093090,00.html#ixzz1YnBwZ4lR

increased from $773 million in 2002 to $2.5 billion in 2010. In April 2009, the two countries held joint military exercises, and visa requirements were dropped, encouraging greater transfer of people and goods between the two neighbours. In 2010, Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon signed a free-trade agreement. Until the Syrian uprising began earlier this year, it appeared Davutoğlu’s “zero problems” policy was working.

Turkey’s initial response to the Syrian uprising, which began in the south western town of Deraa in March 2011, was muted. On 25 May, Davutoğlu said that the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad must win back the hearts of his people through reform, despite the fact that the increasingly-coordinated opposition groups strenuously rejected negotiation with a regime willing to shoot civilians. Turkish officials reportedly recommended a national anti-corruption campaign and reform of Syria’s feared state security and intelligence services, known as the mukhabarat. They also urged Assad to undertake a national dialogue inclusive of the Islamist Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which has been brutally suppressed for years, and was virtually destroyed in the 1982 Hama massacre.

This stands in stark contrast to Erdoğan’s immediate calls for regime change in Egypt, in which Turkey was among the first countries to call upon Mubarak to relinquish power; as well as Turkey’s involvement in the Nato-led no-fly zone in Libya. Erdoğan insisted, however, that Syria was different, describing the revolution in May 2011 as, “the equivalent of internal politics for Turkey” and Assad’s brutal crackdown as “quite concerning and annoying”. In the same week as Erdoğan’s remarks, the National Organisation for Human Rights in Syria reported that Syrian and international human rights organisations had documented more than 1,100 killings and approximately 4,000 injuries “causing permanent disabilities to young men, women and children” committed by regime forces.

Turkey’s calls for reform in May 2011 were piecemeal compared with other European countries, which later that month collectively urged the UN Security Council to warn Syria that its oppression “may amount to crimes against humanity,” and the Group of Eight (G8), which released a draft statement stating: “Should the Syrian authorities not heed this call, we will consider action in the United Nations Security Council”. In the same week in August that the U.N. heard evidence that the death toll in Syria had exceeded 2,200, Davutoğlu met Assad in Damascus, where he demanded an end to military operations and that “the legitimate democratic demands of the people […] be met”. Within a couple of days of the meeting, operations had intensified, most notably in the Syrian towns of Deir ez-Zour and Lattakia. In a strongly worded press statement Davutoğlu asserted: “from a human rights point of view, these events cannot in any way be considered as merely an internal affairs

42 Ibid
44 Ibid
47 ‘UN: Death Toll in Syria Crackdown More Than 2,200,’ Reuters, 22 Aug 2011
49 Assad and Erdoğan in 2009 (AP)
Outlining Turkey’s commitment to the Syrian people, he said: “Turkey stands by the legitimate democratic aspirations of the Syrian people, just as it stood by those of the people of Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. This is a stance that is part of a principled policy. A change in this policy is out of question.” 50

The statement appeared to warn that unless the violence stopped, Turkey would no longer help with the process of internal Syrian reform. Davutoğlu argued in favour of establishing a process to meet these aspirations, warning that “if the [military] operations are not terminated, there will be nothing left to talk about regarding the subsequent steps to be taken in this process.” 51 Despite the high-sounding rhetoric, his commitment to reforming a regime willing to kill its own people betrayed an obvious lack of consistency in Turkey’s responses to the Arab Spring.

More recently, however, Turkey appears to have realised that supporting reform is an untenable position. Not only have the protestors themselves strenuously resisted both reform and dialogue with the regime, but the international community has united in calls for Assad to go. Between August and October, the US, UK, as well as the EU and the UN called on Assad to step down. Early this month Erdoğan said that Turkey will impose its own sanctions on Syria, despite the failure of a European-drafted resolution at the UN Security Council following vetoes from Russia and China.52

Despite this volte face, it has been suggested that Turkey does not fully support the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people. Some claim that since Turkey has failed to publicly criticise the country’s appalling human rights record for economic expediency, it has no real moral influence. “Turkey should have pushed Bashar to make reforms in past years,” Khaled Khoja, a Turkish-based member of the Syrian opposition group Damascus Declaration committee, told Time magazine in May this year. “You cannot have an attitude, an active role, unless you are brave enough to step behind the reforms. You have to say this strongly,” he said.53

With the US tacitly agreeing to Turkey co-ordinating and liaising with the Syrian opposition, there are concerns that the Islamist AKP is interfering to ensure maximum influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. In May 2011, a broad-based group of Syrian oppositionists met in the Turkish resort of Antalya to produce preliminary logistical and legal support for the revolutionaries, which annoyed officials in Damascus and further strained the countries’ relationship. While the formal launch of the resultant Syrian National Council occurred in Istanbul on 2 October, the council’s creation was prematurely announced in late August after a conference in Istanbul, allegedly by a group of young secular Syrian activists who “had grown tired of seeing the AKP trying to make their revolution a Muslim Brotherhood-led affair”.54

Most worrying is the recent allegation that Turkey handed a rebel Syrian officer back to the Assad regime. Lt Col Hussain Harmoush defected in June in response to the vicious government assault on the

53 Why Syria and Turkey Are Suddenly Far Apart on Arab Spring Protests, Time Magazine, 26 May 2011
54 ‘Turkey’s Neo-Ottoman Foreign Policy’, Radio Free Europe, 16 September 2011
northern town of Jisr al-Shughour and fled to Turkey, where he became the spokesman for a resistance movement of defecting soldiers, the Free Syrian Army. In September, rumours of his capture circulated in Syria and a week later he appeared on state-sponsored Syrian Arab News Agency and denied being ordered to open fire on civilians.

How Harmoush was captured remains unclear. Ali El-Khalaf, a Syrian oppositionist told Channel 4 News: “He has either been kidnapped by the Syrian authorities or arrested by the Turkish police and handed to the Syrian regime.”55 Harmoush's brother Ibrahim claims he was handed to Syrian officials following a meeting with Turkish security officials;56 however Ammar Abdulhamid, a prominent US-based spokesperson for the opposition, relays eyewitness reports that Harmoush was actually kidnapped in a military raid on the town of Ibleen in Syria.57 The debate continues within the Free Syrian Army: while some members have called on Erdoğan to personally investigate the disappearance,58 one senior member, Riad al-Asaad, publicly denies Turkish involvement, stating “We assure our people that the Turkish government has nothing to do with Hussein Harmoush's arrest.”59

Whatever the truth, the Harmoush affair highlights Turkey's ineffectiveness (wilful or otherwise) in improving Syria's behaviour. Erdoğan's credibility among the Syrian opposition is diminishing rapidly as rumours of Turkish collusion continue. During a recent trip to Egypt, Erdoğan was heckled by Syrian activists shouting “Erdoğan Coward” and “Erdoğan, where is Harmoush?”60 Abdulhamid argues that

The European Union

As Turkey's efforts to join the EU reach their sixth year, a European Commission report acknowledges that “the accession negotiations with Turkey have regrettably not moved into any new areas for a year”.62 Whereas Turkey previously needed the EU, the Turks now increasingly feel that “the EU needs Turkey more than Turkey needs it,” as Turkey's Europe minister, Egemen Bagis said recently.63 Many are questioning whether Turkey is turning away from Europe.

In terms of trade, the relationship remains healthy: the EU dominates both Turkey's imports and exports and Turkey ranks 7th in the EU's top import and 5th in export markets.64 While a 2010 study by the European Parliament found that trade volume with the EU has experienced a small decline, it welcomed the eastward focus as a consequence of economic reform and greater openness with its Middle Eastern neighbours, arguing that “historically, trade with these countries was neglected, and Turkey had its face turned to the West, not East”.65 According to Turkish economist Dr Hasan Selçuk, the recent changes are a reflection of pragmatic policy rather than political preference: “I do not think the rise in trade with Eastern countries means a shift in the axis of Turkey. Sure, political preferences of the government have had an influence [... but] if there is more demand for trade from the EU

58 ‘Call issued by the Army of the Free Officers to the Turkish Prime Minister,’ YouTube video, hosted by al-Arabiya at http://www.arabia.net/articles/2011/09/07/165799.html
60 ‘Turkey accused after defector returned to Syria,’ Channel 4 news, 15 September 2011
61 Syrian Revolution Digest blog, 15 September 2011
63 Ibid
65 “Is Turkey more open to the East or West?”, Report for the European Parliament Directorate-General for External policies of the Union, April 2010
countries, Turkey would surely be eager to respond.”

Increasing political tensions between Turkey and the EU, however, belie the apparent economic harmony. With the Eurozone in crisis and Turkey’s economy and regional power growing, relations with the EU are worsening. EU peace talks regarding Cyprus have faltered and the Greek Cypriots, who represent the country internationally, insist that Turkey cannot join the EU until the issue is resolved. Cyprus has been divided since a Turkish invasion in 1974 and Turkey is the only country to formally recognise Turkish Cypriot state.

Turkey’s rhetoric regarding Cyprus has become increasingly aggressive in recent months: their disagreement in September over a deal to secure gas exploration in the Mediterranean, for example, resulted in the European Commission urging both parties to show restraint after Turkey suggested sending a naval presence to the disputed area. In the same week, Turkey’s Deputy Prime Minister Besir Ataly threatened to freeze relations with the EU if the Greek-Cypriot government is granted its six month rotating presidency from July 2012.

European politicians are also worried that Turkey’s increasingly frosty relations with Israel will undermine EU accession talks. Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, a German Member of the European Parliament (MEP) involved in the delegation to the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), has said “With a strident anti-Israel course, it isn’t making any friends in Europe”. However, there are disagreements within Europe over how much blame to apportion to Turkey over the breakdown in relations with Israel. Elmar Brok, a German MEP also involved in the delegation to the EU-Turkey JPC, claims Turkey “is using the conflict with Israel in order to gain credibility in the region.”

On the other hand, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a French MEP previously involved with the EU-Turkey JPC, is more sympathetic to Turkey, stating that “Erdoğan is deeply injured” over Israel’s refusal to compromise over Turkey’s demands.

Despite this, Turkey claims to be committed to full EU membership. In September, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç dismissed the suggestion that Turkey accept a “privileged partnership”, insisting that: “our relations with the EU date back to 1958 […] Turkey will be a full member when the process is over.” Arınç was also clear about Turkey’s international ambitions: “We consider it small progress for Turkey to become a regional power. And why shouldn’t Turkey become a global power?”

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67 ‘EU Commission wants Turkey, Cyprus to show restraint,’ Reuters, 19 September 2011
68 Turkey to freeze EU ties if Cyprus gets EU presidency, Reuters, 18 Sep 2011
69 Israel decides not to respond to Erdogan rhetoric,’ Ynet news, 14 September 2011, available at http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4122526,00.html
70 Ibid
71 Ibid
73 Ibid
Turkey’s growing trade relations with the Middle East lends authority to its increased assertiveness in regional affairs. But, while its “zero problems” foreign policy previously had the effect of improving fraught relationships, such as with Syria, Turkey’s current aggressive policies could prove difficult for all involved.

Turkey’s relations with Israel are at an all-time low – arguably the two strongest democracies and economies in the region, they have reached a stand-off where neither side is willing to compromise or admit fault. Erdoğan’s public criticism of Israel’s Operation Cast Lead and the IDF raid on the Gaza flotilla has earned him regional respect, notably in Egypt where the press compare his actions favourably to those their own government. Self-determination for Palestinians is increasingly becoming the bedrock of Erdoğan’s public commitment to a moral foreign policy; a stark contrast to Turkey’s repressive internal policies towards the Kurds.

Throughout the Syrian uprising the influence Turkey believed it had earned with President Assad has proved meaningless, and Turkey has conceded to join the international community’s calls for Assad to go. Turkey is aggressively promoting the Muslim Brotherhood within the Syrian opposition, despite widespread oppositionist calls for secularism and the fact that Islamist movement has a limited following in Syria compared with Egypt or Tunisia. Turkey is struggling with the influx of refugees on its border with Syria, but its reluctance to allow UN officials, aid agencies or journalists access to the Syrian refugee camps on its border with Turkey indicates a lack of transparency.

Turkey’s recent investment Egypt – both economically and politically – is likely motivated by a shrewd desire to take advantage of the vacuum of power in Egypt following the departure of former President Mubarak, which Turkey strenuously supported. While Turkey advocates a strong Egypt for regional balance, Egypt is at risk of becoming Turkey’s subordinate. In advance of the Tunisian elections this month, Erdoğan advocated his party’s Islamist model of governance stating Islam and democracy were compatible; following the Islamist party Ennahda’s victory there, it is likely that Turkey has an interest in the outcome of the forthcoming Egyptian elections, where the Muslim Brotherhood are expected to do well.

With the Eurozone in crisis and Turkey’s economy and regional clout growing, relations with the EU are worsening. Turkish trade with the EU is declining slowly, as economic reforms and greater openness with its Middle Eastern neighbours is opening markets eastwards. Turkey’s domestic human rights record, its repression of Turkey’s Kurdish population as well opposition from other European members has stalled its bid to join the EU – no progress has been made in the last year. EU peace talks regarding Cyprus have faltered, and Turkey publicly threatened Cyprus in September 2011 with a naval presence following a disagreement over gas exploration in the Mediterranean.

There are those who wonder whether Turkey’s recent actions are predicated on the belief that the West is on the decline. Erdoğan is an aspiring global player: using the Arab Spring revolutions and regional opprobrium of Israel he has secured regional popularity; and Turkey is undoubtedly a regional economic heavyweight. However, it is arguable whether Turkey has secured the equivalent political power. Turkey’s limitations regarding the Arab
Spring revolutions – most notably vis-à-vis Syria – are becoming clearer, casting doubt over its perceived ability to reign in Iran's nuclear ambitions. It is also important to remember that Turkish predominance in the Arab Spring – its crucial role in co-ordinating the Syrian opposition for example – is a direct result of US President Obama’s “lead from behind” strategy, which encourages greater involvement by Muslim-majority countries or regional blocs in the Arab Spring.