

## **TURKEY & ISRAEL**

### *Brinkmanship & The Grand Strategy Of The Erdogan Government*

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Brinkmanship occurs when a state threatens to use force to pressure an adversary to offer concessions that it would otherwise be unwilling to make save under threat of war. As such, it is an intrinsically dangerous form of statecraft, for it depends upon very clear and easily comprehended signalling so that an opponent can both appreciate what is being demanded and the possible consequences of non-compliance. Brinkmanship also requires a very steady hand in its implementation for the potential for escalation is ever-present, and can be triggered by poor communications, unexpected mishaps, or misunderstandings by both the instigator and the object of its policy. Perhaps the best known example of this type of mailed fist diplomacy occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis when the Kennedy Administration declared a blockade on Cuba and threatened to use force to maintain it. The crisis came to a close when Moscow withdrew its missiles from Cuba in return for private assurances that US missiles in Turkey would be dismantled. Before that happened, there were many moments of high tension as Soviet-flagged ships approached US naval vessels tasked to enforce the quarantine zone. The possibility of war was real even if, as we now know, neither leader wanted it to occur.

We could be watching something similar unfolding today with Turkey's policy toward Israel. Following the 2 September leak to *The New York Times* of the Palmer Committee Report that had been requested by the UN Secretary-General, the government of Premier Recep Erdogan has significantly escalated tensions with Tel Aviv.<sup>1</sup> Ostensibly because Israel refuses to apologise for its use of armed force to stop the Gaza Flotilla (31 May 2010) during which nine Turkish citizens were killed, Ankara announced a number of sanctions. These include a downgrading of diplomatic and defence relations, and a set of initiatives at the UN and the International Court of Justice.<sup>2</sup> In one other incident, Israeli citizens arriving at Istanbul airport were seriously harassed by customs officials, further signalling Turkey's displeasure.<sup>3</sup> Relations between the two countries have been strained since the accession to power of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (*Adelet ve Kalkinma Partisi*, or AKP) in 2002, but tensions greatly increased following the Israeli offensive against the Hezbollah stronghold in southern Lebanon in 2008. Ankara's recent behaviour should lay to rest any expectation that the two countries' strategic partnership can be revived in the near-term.<sup>4</sup>

Turkish officials have threatened even more serious consequences if Israel does not accede to its demands. In addition to the sanctions, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said that his country

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<sup>1</sup> Neil MacFarquhar and Ethan Bronner, "Report Finds Naval Blockade by Israel Legal But Faults Raid," *The New York Times*, 2 September 2011. See also *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel on the 31 May 2010 Flotilla Incident*, July 2011, accessed on 3 September 2011 at <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/Palmer-Committee-Final-report.pdf>. Hereafter, this publication will be referred to as the *Palmer Report*.

<sup>2</sup> Saban Kardas, "Turkey Seeks to Internationalize Mavi Marmara Dispute with Israel," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 7 September 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Glick, "Our World: Ankara's Chosen Scapegoat," *The Jerusalem Post*, 5 September 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Benny Morris, "Israel Under Siege," *The National Interest*, 5 September 2011, accessed on 8 September 2011 at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/israel-under-siege-5844>.

“will apply all necessary preventive measures in order to ensure navigational freedom” in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> Erdogan was more explicit. He declared that the Flotilla Incident had provided “grounds for war” but that “befitting Turkey’s greatness, we decided to act with patience”, and added;

Turkish warships will be tasked with protecting the Turkish boats bringing humanitarian aid to the Gaza strip. From now on, we will no longer allow these boats to be the targets of attacks by Israel, like the one on the Freedom Flotilla [of May 2010], because then Israel will have to deal with an appropriate response.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after, Turkish media reported that the country’s Southern Naval Command had begun to prepare three frigates to ensure freedom of passage in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Turkish media stoked the crisis even further by claiming that Israeli fighter aircraft harassed Turkish gas exploration ships off the coast of Cyprus. While the Turkish General Staff denied that the incident took place, the attention that story quickly gained underscores the highly charged atmosphere in the wake of the increase in Turkish-Israeli tensions.<sup>8</sup> Among other things, Ankara obviously intends that the threat to deploy its navy to support a “humanitarian convoy” *en route* to Gaza will significantly raise the stakes of any contemplated Israeli interdiction. It has stated that it does not accept the Palmer Commission’s findings that the blockade is legal and recent statements would seem to indicate that it is now prepared to challenge Israeli policy more directly. Further escalation is possible. There is always the potential for an uncontrolled or unexpected response – and, of course, Israel has already demonstrated that it is prepared to use force to maintain a maritime blockade of the Hamas-controlled Gaza strip.

The situation is, therefore, very dangerous. It is made worse by the very limited ability of outside players to exercise a calming influence. Neither Ankara nor Tel Aviv trust Brussels, and individual European Powers have no authority in either capital. Efforts by Washington in Ankara, with which ties are also strained, to reset the Turkish-Israeli relationship have consistently failed to bridge the growing divide.<sup>9</sup> The Turkish Armed Forces no longer trusts Washington’s intentions and the AKP leadership, having drawn support for this and other policies from both nationalist and populist elements, is constrained from rebuilding relations in the face of hostile public opinion. Given these circumstances, and the ever-present unpredictable factor in brinkmanship, one has to wonder why Ankara would hazard an armed confrontation with Israel. As one Turkish commentator has recently argued, there seem to be few if any national security interests informing the current policy.<sup>10</sup> If there are so few or even none at all, what objectives are being served by Turkey’s confrontational stance? The answers, and there are several, lie in Turkey’s regional ambitions as well as the AKP’s domestic political profile.

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<sup>5</sup> Gokhan Kutaran, “Minister: Israel Acts Like Somali Pirates,” *Hurriyet Daily News* (Istanbul), 8 September 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ibon Villedelabeitia, “Turkish PM saw Gaza raid as ‘grounds for war’,” *Reuters*, 12 September 2009, and “Israel calls Turkey warship threat grave,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, 9 September 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ceyda Karaaslan, “Dogfight Era in Mediterranean,” *Sabah Online*, 12 September 2011.

<sup>8</sup> “Turkey denies Israeli aircraft harassed Turkish ships,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 4 October 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Amanda Paul and Demir Murat Seyrik, “Turkish foreign policy and the Arab Spring,” *Commentary* (Brussels: European Policy Centre, 15 July 2011), accessed on 20 August 2011 at [www.epc.eu](http://www.epc.eu).

<sup>10</sup> Kadri Gursel, “Gaza is no ‘national cause’,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, 12 September 2011.

## A.) The Ottoman Empire Redux

Unlike previous governments, the leadership of the AKP regards the Republic of Turkey as the successor to the once-powerful Ottoman Empire. In a region where symbols often carry great political significance, the image of Erdogan and four government ministers acting as pall bearers at the August 2009 funeral of the last heir to the Ottoman throne signalled a profound respect for the predecessor regime and a claim to its historical legitimacy.<sup>11</sup> Enduring for seven centuries, the Empire had united territories from North Africa to Mesopotamia, from the Danube to the lower Nile, under the rule of the Sultan (and as Caliph after 1517). Although the republic, established in 1922, eschewed any links with the Ottomans, many modern-day Turkish nationalists, frustrated by the refusal of the European Union (EU) to admit their country, have rediscovered their imperial past. Some foreign observers have portrayed Ahmet Davutoglu, widely acknowledged as the guiding hand behind the AKP's foreign policy, as an Ottoman fantasist.<sup>12</sup> More generously, one scholar of modern Turkey has referred to him as an idealist who "stresses morality and identity issues".<sup>13</sup> Many statesmen, however, have drawn inspiration from their countries' past greatness and Turkey is no exception. More than two decades ago, Premier Turgut Ozal (1983-1989) believed that Turkey's heritage should empower national policy and encouraged a greater Ottoman perspective in contemporary policy-making.<sup>14</sup> Davutoglu, a strong nationalist who has been described as the equivalent of an Islamic Calvinist, is a more recent example<sup>15</sup>: Erdogan is reputed to be another.<sup>16</sup> In modern Turkey, however, emphasising the Ottoman era is not merely pandering to nostalgia, for it can serve a practical purpose. Neo-Ottomanism offers a unifying national theme to secular and religious Turks and, by doing so, provides a means to overcome the extremely harsh divisions that characterise the country's politics, more so since the accession to power of the AKP.<sup>17</sup> For the government especially, drawing upon the Ottoman legacy is viewed both as an expression of national pride and as a way to ground their Islamist agenda in a history that predates the modern republic.

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<sup>11</sup> Gareth Jenkins, "On the edge – The AKP shifts Turkey's political compass," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, August 2010, accessed on 15 September at <http://www.janes.com/products/janes/defence-security-report.aspx?id=1065927527>.

<sup>12</sup> For a short biographical sketch of Ahmet Davutoglu, see James Traub, "Turkey's Rules," *The New York Times*, 20 January 2011. According to press reports, both President Abdullah Gul and Premier Erdogan refer to Davutoglu as Hodja (teacher), a form of address denoting respect for another's intellect and insight. (See "An eminence grise; The visionary behind Turkey's newly assertive foreign policy," *The Economist*, 15 November 2007 and Laure Marchand, "Ahmet Davutoglu, stratege de l'emancipation turque," *Le Figaro*, 14 juin 2010). Interestingly, despite his later efforts to distance himself politically from the long-time Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan, Erdogan initially referred to him as Hodja.

<sup>13</sup> See also M. Hakan Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 233.

<sup>14</sup> Kemal Karpat, "Turks Remember Their Ottoman Ancestors", ed. Kemal Karpat, *Ottoman Past and Today's Turkey* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2000), p. xiv.

<sup>15</sup> Wolfgang Günter Lerch, "Politik der strategischen Tiefe," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 September 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Erdogan is purportedly less vocal about his Ottoman-philia than Davutoglu. Nevertheless, during his term as Mayor of Istanbul, he referred to himself as Sehremini, the Ottoman-Turkish title of governor. Zeyneb Cagliyan Imisker, *The Changing Nature of Islamism in Turkey; A Comparison of Erbakan and Erdogan*, (MA Thesis, Bilkent University, 2002), p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Dan Bilefsky, "Frustrated with West, Turks Revel in Empire Lost," *The New York Times*, 5 December 2009.

The belief that the modern republic is the Ottomans' heir also underwrites an activist foreign policy. It presents Turkey as being uniquely endowed to exercise international leadership with historically significant connections to the Balkans, the Middle East and also Central Asia: an effort to become, in Erdogan's own words, "a regional power and a global player."<sup>18</sup> In part, this is due to a new national self-confidence flowing from the country's strong economic performance in recent years even as the global financial crisis becomes an increasingly absorbing distraction in other countries. However, current policy is also informed by beliefs rooted in the AKP's Islamist outlook. In a book written in the mid-1990s while he held an academic post, Davutoglu wrote that the West lacks "value legitimacy" and that, while the Islamic world has fallen behind the West economically and technologically, Muslim civilisation is inherently superior and will eventually become the "determinant civilisation" as soon as it can "operationalise their [sic] value structure."<sup>19</sup> The Ottoman heritage permits Turkey to claim a special role (possibly conceived by devout Muslims such as Erdogan and Davutoglu as less a policy option and more a calling<sup>20</sup>) in promoting that aim. Revitalizing historical Ottoman-era ties would allow Turkey to assume what the AKP leadership views as its rightful place on the world stage.<sup>21</sup> As Davutoglu has more recently asserted, Turkey is not "an ordinary nation-state", but has the potential to be a trans-regional power that can, as in the past, unify and lead the Muslim world. It "has no chance to be peripheral", he has asserted, and "it is not a sideline country of the EU, NATO or Asia".<sup>22</sup> Celebrating victory in the June 2011 parliamentary election, Erdogan voiced this perspective when, from the balcony of his party's headquarters, he stated that "Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul; Beirut won as much as Izmir; Damascus won as much as Ankara; Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as

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<sup>18</sup> Howard Eissenstat, "A tale of two flotillas", *The Immanent Flame; secularism, religion and the public sphere* (A blog administered by the Social Science Research Council), 2 August 2011, accessed on 25 August 2011 at <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/08/02/a-tale-of-two-flotillas/>. See also a report prepared by the US Ambassador to Ankara, James Jeffrey (2008 to 2011), in which he cited a November 2009 speech by Davutoglu given to AKP leaders and parliamentarians US Embassy in Ankara. During his address, he purportedly stated that "yes, we are the new Ottomans". In his report, Jeffrey stated that "the term roughly coincides with Davutoglu's world-view and adds an academic and ideological backbone to his pragmatic 'zero problems with neighbors' policy. It trades on common historical and cultural traits among the countries in Turkey's larger neighborhood to form the basis for closer cooperation rather than conflict. The theory conveniently justifies why Turkey -- as a comparatively stable, democratic, affluent country -- should serve as the anchor for such a geopolitical alignment." See Wikileaks, "US Embassy; FM Davutoglu – Yes, We Are The New Ottomans", 3 December 2009, accessed on 18 September 2011 at [wikileaks.org/cable/2009/12/09ANKARA1717.html](http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/12/09ANKARA1717.html). Jeffrey's report noted and dismissed a disclaimer issued by Turkish officials about the contents of Davutoglu's speech.

<sup>19</sup> Gareth Jenkins, "On the edge – The AKP shifts Turkey's political compass," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, August 2010. Interestingly, Davutoglu has denied that his writing is meant to divide peoples. In an interview with a major German weekly, he stated that "I do not believe in a hierarchical superiority among civilisations. (...) But, of course, Western civilisation is not the last one that will be given – none is ever the last." See Boris Kalnocky, "Ahmet Davutoglu: Manche Europäer verstehen die neue Türkei nicht," *Welt am Sonntag*, 8 September 2011.

<sup>20</sup> In his recent speech to the Arab League, Erdogan stated, with reference to Turkey and the Arab world that "we are called upon to cooperate more closely than ever." Erdal Sen and Cunali Oral, "Erdogan calls upon Arab nation to unite, raise the Palestinian flag," *Today's Zaman* (Istanbul), 13 September 2011.

<sup>21</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 233.

<sup>22</sup> Joshua W. Walker, "Introduction: The Sources of Turkish Grand Strategy – 'Strategic Depth' and 'Zero Problems' in Context," *LSE Ideas: Turkey's Global Strategy* (London 2010), p. 7, accessed on 4 October at <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/SR007.aspx>.

Diyarbakir.”<sup>23</sup> In the context of a national election, such rhetoric sounds out-of-place: this passage only makes sense when it is recalled that the cities mentioned were once part of the Ottoman realm.<sup>24</sup>

## **B.) Isolate Israel (and create new opportunities for Turkish foreign policy)**

How does this fit with the current policy toward Israel? In the wake of the release of the Palmer Report, it is apparent that a key objective of Turkish foreign policy is to isolate that country in the Middle East. It is difficult to ascertain if this is intended to produce real changes in Tel Aviv’s policies with regard to the Gaza blockade. It seems more likely that Ankara is using the confrontation with Israel to push a larger regional re-alignment. The demand for a public apology from Tel Aviv can, therefore, be viewed as largely political theatre that, alongside rupturing relations with Israel, creates increased space for Ankara’s diplomatic manoeuvring. It does so by generating new and friendly expectations of Turkish policy among the region’s Arab governments, especially those formed after the Arab Spring revolutions, and by directly addressing the popular frustration felt throughout the region due to the strategic advantage accruing to Israel from its Turkish alliance. That such a connection is perceived to exist is attested to by Arab criticism of those ties when they were first established and since, and by more recent evidence that the continued inflow of foreign investment -- the so-called “Green Money” -- from such states as Saudi Arabia and Malaysia was, as early as 2005, made contingent upon the readjustment of Turkey’s relationship with Israel.<sup>25</sup>

There are, of course, many streams feeding into Turkey’s policy stance toward Israel. Some might even be viewed as exercising a salutary influence. For example, even as bilateral military ties have ended, trade and tourism, both of which have grown exponentially in recent years, are undoubtedly acting as a restraint on any impetus toward a complete severance of contacts. Others are far less positive and fuel a more extreme dynamic. Alongside the profound public anger over the Gaza Flotilla Incident, the disdain for Israel that is common in Islamist circles and is frequently voiced by leaders of the AKP (and its predecessor, the Refah Party, from which they all sprang) must also be assumed to be exercising some role. The Refah Party leader, Necmettin Erbakan, openly attacked the global influence of what he saw as a Zionist conspiracy and called for a break in relations with Israel.<sup>26</sup> And although Erdogan himself does not engage in the often

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<sup>23</sup> “Turkey seeking leadership role in the Muslim world,” *Courcy’s Intelligence Brief*, 15 June 2011, accessed on 21 June 2011 at [http://courcyint.com/component/k2/item/47703.html?period=June+2011&archive=22749&cat\\_id=22749%3Aturkey-seeking-leadership-role-in-the-muslim-world](http://courcyint.com/component/k2/item/47703.html?period=June+2011&archive=22749&cat_id=22749%3Aturkey-seeking-leadership-role-in-the-muslim-world).

<sup>24</sup> In a speech in Sarajevo at the conclusion of the Eid religious celebration, Davutoglu gave voice to a similar perspective: “In our traditions, we celebrate Eid at home. This is what I am doing, I celebrate Eid with my family in Sarajevo. Bosnia is our home and Bosnians are our family members.” Celil Sagir, “Davutoglu celebrates Eid in Bosnia and Hercegovina, calls Sarajevo home,” *Today’s Zaman* (Istanbul), 30 August 2011.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of “green money” and Turkey, see Michael Rubin, “Green Money, Islamist Politics in Turkey”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 12, Winter 2005, pp. 13-23.

<sup>26</sup> Emil Zurcher, *Turkey; A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), p. 315. See also Hugh Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent; Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 279-281. Erbakan generally opposed improving relations with Israel, but while Prime Minister (1997), and under intense pressure from the senior command of the Turkish Armed Forces, he was forced to sign a series of agreements on military cooperation with Tel Aviv. See Heinz Kramer, *A Changing Turkey; The Challenge to Europe and the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2000), p. 33.

rabid anti-Semitic commentary that Erbakan (his one-time mentor) employed, he has frequently resorted to harsh anti-Israeli rhetoric that focuses on the suffering of Palestinians and what he has termed “Israeli war-crimes”.<sup>27</sup> Very early in his premiership, Erdogan termed Tel Aviv’s policy toward the Palestinians as “state terrorism” and, although differences were papered over by official visits and growing bilateral trade, such comments have been repeated.<sup>28</sup> Their repetition provides some insight into the private thinking of the AKP leadership, and helps explain the growing friction over the Palestinian question, particularly during the past two years. In January 2009, Erdogan condemned the Israeli air campaign against the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and stated that “Allah will punish it.”<sup>29</sup> At the March 2009 Davos Summit, he publicly upbraided the Israeli president, accused Israel of killing Palestinian children and referred to Gaza as an “open air prison”. That October, Ankara disinvited Israel from participating in joint military exercises with the US and Italy, and called upon the world to recognise Hamas as the “legitimate government of the Palestinian people.”<sup>30</sup> Two years later, at the opening of the UN General Assembly in September 2011, Erdogan spoke again to this theme by describing the Palestinian issue as a “bleeding wound” and accused Israel of thwarting all attempts to resolve it. And, unsurprisingly, he reiterated the demands his government has issued to Israel charging it with having made “a grave mistake against a country and a people.”<sup>31</sup>

To some degree, and perhaps unavoidably so, the government’s position is posturing for domestic political purposes. A Turkish commentator has written that Erdogan is “totally convinced that people in Turkey like his bullying behaviour as a tough man of the people.”<sup>32</sup> And such views can be reinforced by the reaction of the crowds at home: in one case, on his return to Istanbul from the 2009 Davos Summit, he was greeted with cheering crowds who compared him with the great twelfth century Seljuk leader, Saladin. However, it is always possible to over-state the pragmatism of political leaders. There are few observers who doubt that Erdogan’s worldview, and that of other leading AKP members, is informed by religious faith. That faith is not merely instrumental but, by all accounts, is a defining personal characteristic. Beyond outward expressions of personal piety, it can sometimes assume

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<sup>27</sup> Early on in his political career, Erdogan had been close to Erbakan and referred to him as one of his spiritual guides. They were both involved with the Nakshibendi Sufi Order and attended meetings at the Iskenderpasha Seminary where socio-political topics were purportedly discussed. After Erdogan won the Istanbul mayoral election for Refah in 1994, Erbakan referred to him as “Fatih” (i.e., Conqueror), the title awarded to the Ottoman sultan who captured Constantinople in 1453. (See Imisker, *The Changing Nature of Islamism in Turkey; A Comparison of Erbakan and Erdogan*, pp. 38-40.) In 2000, however, Erdogan and several other Refah members founded the AKP. Afterward, relations with Erbakan became increasingly bitter. Shortly before he died in early-2011, Erbakan publicly accused Erdogan’s government of betraying the principles he had earlier espoused. See Abdullah Bozkurt, “Erbakan criticizes Israel, accuses Erdogan of being part of Jewish conspiracy,” *Today’s Zaman* (Istanbul), 6 December 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Chris McGreal, “Turkish PM accuses Israel of practicing state terrorism,” *The Guardian*, 4 June 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Saziya Burcu Giray, “Turkish policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” ed. Moshe Ma’oz, *Muslim Attitudes to Jews and Israel* (Eastbourne, United Kingdom: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> Zeyno Baran, *Torn Country; Turkey, between Secularism and Islamism* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 2010), pp. 117-121.

<sup>31</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “Harsh Words From Turkey About Israel, and From Iran about United States,” *The New York Times*, 22 September 2011. See also “Tragedy of Somalia shames the world, Turkish leader tells UN,” *UN News Service*, 23 September 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Nur Bilge Criss, “Dismantling Turkey: The Will of the People?,” eds. Birol Yesilada and Barry Rubin, *Islamicization of Turkey under the AKP Rule* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 51.

questionable dimensions, such as when the Turkish premier stated that Israel “war crimes” in Gaza were worse than anything that had taken place in Sudan; and when he denied that the regime of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, now indicted by the International Criminal Court, had practised genocidal policies (as the rest of the world believed) because no Muslim can commit such transgressions.<sup>33</sup> At other times, such as when he is faced with some aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, that faith clearly generates a profound empathy. Given the influence of Islam on Erdogan’s thinking (and that of leading AKP personalities), national interests are themselves informed by a world-view that emphasises the plight of fellow believers beyond his country’s borders.

While Islam undoubtedly comprises much of the background, the current policy toward Israel is nonetheless also guided by the strategic goal of enhancing Turkey’s regional profile. For Davutoglu, it is inconceivable that Ankara is not playing a pivotal role in resolving regional crises. That this is the case is very evident in his efforts to play a leadership role in resolving a number of local crises, and Turkey’s efforts on Israel’s disputes with its neighbours (e.g., Syria and the Palestinian Authority) are consistent with this perspective. Before the breakdown of its relations with both countries, Turkey took the lead in facilitating, at first secretly and later quite openly, Israeli-Syrian talks; and Davutoglu is on record as arguing that in the dispute over the status of Jerusalem, “no political problem in the region can be resolved without [utilizing] the Ottoman archives”.<sup>34</sup> That some regional governments, most notably Mubarak in Egypt, greatly resented such Turkish initiatives was based on a belief that Ankara did not fully understand the complexities of the region’s disputes; but this resentment might also have been rooted in a concern that Turkey was challenging Egypt’s claim to be the region’s most important Muslim player.

The Gaza Flotilla Incident and its aftermath might also, therefore, be an attempt by Ankara to inject themselves into, and quite possibly to assert leadership of, the Middle East peace process. That the current situation is not merely a knee-jerk reaction and was long in gestation is supported by considerable circumstantial evidence linking the Gaza Flotilla organisers, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (*İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri İnsani Yardım Vakfı*, or IHH), both to the AKP and its leadership. (That the IHH purportedly has links to Islamic extremist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, invites considerations that lie outside the scope of this paper.<sup>35</sup>) According to a Jerusalem-based think-tank, the local AKP in Istanbul facilitated the purchase of the Flotilla’s lead ship, the *Mavi Marmara*, and the IHH leader publicly stated (incorrectly, as it turned out) that the fleet would be sailing under the Turkish flag and therefore safe from interdiction.<sup>36</sup> Erdogan met with the flotilla leadership before the incident at sea and sent a message of support afterward.<sup>37</sup> The Israeli government has also claimed that a computer seized on board the *Mavi Marmara* contained files of transcripts of conversations between the

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<sup>33</sup> Seth Freedman, “Erdogan’s blind faith in Muslims,” *The Guardian*, 11 November 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Bulent Aras, “The Davutoglu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2009, p. 131, accessed on 4 October 2011 at <http://www.setav.org/public/HaberDetay.aspx?Dil=tr&hid=7712&q=davutoglu-era-in-turkish-foreign-policy>.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Christie-Miller and James Hilder, “Turkish charity that sent aid convoy to Gaza ‘has links to terrorism’,” *The Times* (London), 3 June 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Merley, *Turkey, the Global Muslim Brotherhood and the Gaza Flotilla*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2011, p. 7, accessed on 5 October 2011 at [www.jcpa.org/text/Turkey\\_Muslim\\_Brotherhood.pdf](http://www.jcpa.org/text/Turkey_Muslim_Brotherhood.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

IHH organisers and Turkish President Abdullah Gul.<sup>38</sup> And, lastly, according to the Palmer Report, Israel stated that it had repeatedly warned Ankara of the consequences of the Flotilla attempting to breach the Gaza blockade but, as the Report notes, Turkish officials took insufficient action to “warn the Flotilla participants of the potential risks involved and to dissuade them from their actions.”<sup>39</sup> Although none of this constitutes a “smoking gun”, the weight of evidence in light of Turkish policy pronouncements on other regional developments suggests that officials in Ankara might well have viewed the Gaza Flotilla and its aftermath as advantageous to Turkish interests.

If this analysis is correct, discarding the Israeli connection can be interpreted as a carefully calculated policy decision. As one analyst has written, “ideologically, politically and strategically, the Turkish-Israeli alliance was an unwelcome inheritance for the AKP and grew increasingly sour over time.”<sup>40</sup> The alliance had never sat very easily with the rank-and-file membership of the AKP and one can assume much of the leadership, representing as it did an implicit endorsement of Israel’s Palestinian and, later, Gaza policies. But, unable to break down barriers to greater integration with Europe, Turkey realised that the Israeli connection helped it avoid regional isolation and it was influenced in that attitude by Washington’s support for that relationship. By the time the Palmer Report was published, however, the Israeli partnership was already long past its shelf-life as far as Ankara was concerned. The ambition to join the EU was far less central to the AKP than Davutoglu’s belief in “strategic depth” that emphasised a policy tied more firmly to Turkey’s traditional (i.e., pre-republic) profile. When Turkish president Abdullah Gul declared the Palmer Report “null and void” and stated that his country “will not only protect its own rights but also those of all people in need”, he was making a veiled reference to Turkey’s intention to continue to pursue a larger regional profile.<sup>41</sup> Turkey’s foreign policy, based on “zero problems with neighbours”, needed a moral foundation in the Muslim world that was effectively undermined by even the vestiges of a strategic partnership with Israel, which the AKP had never endorsed. The outreach to post-Mubarak Egypt, where Erdogan recently proposed a new strategic partnership to the military regime, and his travels to Somalia, Libya and Tunisia, and Ankara’s high-profile opposition to Assad’s continuing crackdown in Syria, all suggest that new opportunities have been afforded by the Arab Spring revolutions to advance Turkey’s grander ambition.<sup>42</sup> Isolating Israel, by demanding an apology from Tel Aviv backed by a threat of force, seems designed to present Turkey to governments and populations as a powerful (perhaps the most powerful) Muslim state, as well as a politically stable and effective regional leader.

### C.) Domestic Political Considerations

The second driver of Turkey’s policy toward Israel is domestic politics. If the confrontation with Israel is a function of the opportunity that was offered by the Gaza Flotilla Incident (created or

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<sup>38</sup> Yaakov Lappin, “Turkish gov’t backed extremists,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 9 June 2010.

<sup>39</sup> *Palmer Report*, p. 50.

<sup>40</sup> Eissenstat, “A tale of two flotillas” accessed at <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/08/02/a-tale-of-two-flotillas/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ely Karmon, “Turkey’s foreign policy in shambles,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 4 September 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, on 22 August Davutoglu was the first senior foreign official to visit the rebel capital of Benghazi after Tripoli fell. See Burak Ege Bekdil and Umit Enginsoy, “Turkey Becomes Top Backer of New Libyan Regime,” *Defense News*, 5 September 2011, p. 14.

only exploited) by the government, its timing is to some degree a reflection of developments at home. In a nutshell, the goal of isolating Israel has been made possible by the near total political eclipse of the Turkish Armed Forces. The armed forces had viewed themselves as the protectors of the secular regime and they had toppled four governments, the most recent in 1997 when a coalition that included the Refah Party under Erbakan had been ousted.<sup>43</sup> For several years after it was first elected in 2002, the AKP had governed as though another military coup was an ever-present possibility. For most of its years in office, it therefore followed an approach to foreign relations that emphasised continuity with that of its predecessors. There were, of course, exceptions such as the refusal in 2003 to support the Iraq War and the periodic increase in tensions with Israel. However, for the most part, the AKP leadership was prepared to adopt positions that the military high command could endorse.<sup>44</sup> Erdogan condemned Israeli “state terrorism” in 2004, but the following year made an official visit to Israel. Over time, that caution gradually dissipated as the government gained in confidence in its dealings with the military. Under pressure from the European Union to implement political reforms, the AKP very skilfully repackaged its differences with the military into a confrontation between modernisation and defence of the status quo. When civil-military tensions were painted in those colours, the authority of the armed forces leadership was undermined and the AKP repeatedly triumphed at the polls. When Erdogan and his party were re-elected in July 2007 and the armed forces were unable (despite a very public campaign) to prevent Abdullah Gul from becoming president in August 2007, the AKP leadership realised that it occupied a much stronger position than its uniformed opponents.

Since then, the AKP has waged an aggressive campaign to defeat vestigial opposition within the armed forces. Institutional reforms, most notably those dealing with the National Security Council, have reduced the armed forces’ ability to set the national security agenda; and, over time, the AKP has slowly begun to build a base of support within the officers corps, further undermining the ability of military commanders to resist the government’s agenda. For those who are still identifiable as opponents to Erdogan’s government, more extreme actions have also been taken. By early-2011, nearly two-hundred or ten percent of serving senior officers were under arrest, caught up in prosecutors’ accusations that a coup was being plotted.<sup>45</sup> In a demonstration of their impotence, in mid-July 2011, all of the force commanders as well as the Chief of the General Staff resigned their posts protesting against what they claimed was a government-directed campaign to discredit the senior military leadership.<sup>46</sup> As one regional analyst has written,

After almost nine years, two more elections, as well as court cases in which the generals have been accused of conspiring against the government and been arrested, it can be

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<sup>43</sup> See Ben Lombardi, “Turkey - The Return of the Reluctant Generals?,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 112, Summer 1997, pp. 191-215.

<sup>44</sup> Metin Heper, “The Justice and Development Party Government and the Military in Turkey,” eds. Ali Carkoglu and Barry Rubin, *Religion and Politics in Turkey* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 73-88.

<sup>45</sup> Halil M. Karavelli, “Is the AKP that “Vanquished” the Military Caught Up in the Trap of Militarism,” *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 4, No. 10, 16 May 2011, accessed on 5 October 2011 at <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2011/110516A.html>.

<sup>46</sup> See also Damien McElroy, “Turkey’s entire military command quits over row with government,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 July 2011.

concluded that, in every council meeting [held twice a year], the political influence of the military in the Turkish system has been cut away like another thin slice of salami.<sup>47</sup>

Many commentators have likewise declared that the age of the generals reining in governments it did not like has now passed in modern Turkey. Specifically with regard to regional affairs, however, the era of the military determining foreign relations does seem over. Nowhere is this more evident than in the slow demise of the Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership that was initiated and administered by the armed forces senior command, often without the government's prior approval, and that never enjoyed broad public support. Once the Erdogan government realised that it could be effectively discarded without seriously upsetting the domestic political balance of power, Ankara was no longer willing to subordinate the government's grand strategic objectives to its preservation.

Even if its most inveterate opponent has been vanquished, there are still domestic constraints on the government's ability to conduct its foreign policy. As Davutoglu recently observed "[i]f your foreign policy, however sophisticated it might be, doesn't have a ground in public opinion, then that foreign policy is not sustainable."<sup>48</sup> The Erdogan government is undoubtedly aware that in its confrontation with Israel it does not have a *carte blanche* from the Turkish public. That is, of course, a persistent problem when democratic governments (even those with an authoritarian tint) attempt brinkmanship. In Turkey, the problem is compounded by the fact that the AKP is unlikely to be able to convince a clear majority of the rightness of its policy. A June 2011 poll by the Pew Research Center reveals that the country is very divided internally.<sup>49</sup> The AKP's base of support among Muslim Turks is solid, with sixty-four percent of those who pray five times daily expressing satisfaction with the direction the country is taking. Those Turks who pray once a day are similarly pleased (at fifty-six percent). However, sixty-seven percent of those who pray rarely or not at all – a group that the AKP's opponents are likely to draw support from – is very dissatisfied with what is happening in their country. Altogether, the country is evenly split with forty-nine percent dissatisfied with the direction the country is taking against forty-eight percent who are satisfied. Likewise, more recent issue-specific polling suggests that tolerance of the current anti-Israeli policy of the AKP is not unlimited. While eighty-four percent of those surveyed support the general hardening of Ankara's position in light of the 2010 Gaza Flotilla Incident, there is a noticeable drop when questions about current developments are asked. Just under half, or forty-nine percent of respondents approve the most recent measures implemented by the Erdogan government, while thirty-seven percent oppose them.<sup>50</sup>

The political reforms introduced by the AKP government have effectively suffocated the military's longstanding role as the self-proclaimed (and, after 1980, constitutional) role as guardians of the secular nature of the modern republic. In doing so, they also opened new vistas for the making of foreign policy. The neo-Ottomanism of Ahmet Davutoglu would not have been possible in earlier years for, as the "soft coup" of 1997 revealed, the armed forces would quickly have put a stop to that policy being implemented. The new civil-military environment in Turkey

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<sup>47</sup> Murat Yetkin quoted in Burak Ege Bekdil and Umit Enginsoy, "Turkey Reshapes Military After Top Leaders Resign," *Defense News*, 8 August 2011, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Shadid, "A Successful Diplomat Tries His Hand at Politics," *The New York Times*, 10 June 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Pew Research Center, *On Eve of Elections, a More Upbeat Mood in Turkey*, 7 June 2011, accessed on 5 October 2011 at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/06/07/on-eve-of-elections-a-more-upbeat-mood-in-turkey/>.

<sup>50</sup> "Poll shows support for government's Israel policy," *Today's Zaman* (Istanbul), 14 September 2011.

means that the government now has much greater liberty to frame Turkey's international relations in the way that it wants and to align those relations with its own priorities. However, that freedom is not unlimited. So long as the government upholds the principle of responsible government, the pluralist nature of Turkish society places limits on what it can do.

And, lastly, there is the economy. Like the political reforms, it is also a double-edged sword. Erdogan and the AKP have successfully presented themselves to Turkish voters and to the world-at-large as able managers of the national economy. Growth rates of nearly eleven percent in 2009 suggested that the description of the country as an "Anatolian Tiger" was merited. The high rate of growth earned the AKP support from moderate secularists in the electorate who, dispirited by many years of runaway inflation, were willing to tolerate an Islamist agenda they disliked in return for economic stability. That success also significantly inflated the self-confidence of both nationalists and Islamists in the Turkish model of political and economic development.

There are indications, however, that the economy is more vulnerable than those earlier accolades would have admitted. Much of the government's spending on social programmes that appeal to the AKP's base of support in the rural areas and urban slums has been funded by a growing deficit. That, alongside interest rates that the national bank has kept purposefully low – thereby encouraging borrowing and injecting liquidity into the market – have created a current account deficit nearly as large as that of Greece.<sup>51</sup> Most strikingly, that deficit has doubled in the past year.<sup>52</sup> As one analyst noted, "Turkish banks pumped so much credit into the economy that demand exhausted domestic sources and drew instead on external sources."<sup>53</sup> In response, the government has allowed the Turkish currency, the lira, to depreciate in the hopes that exports might be advantaged; and the lira has depreciated faster (losing twenty percent of its value) than any other major national currency. While this is likely to improve the country's export trade, a more significant consequence is that the cost of living is likely to rise. The size of the dent in the government's reputation abroad and in its public support at home is dependent on the pain that will eventually accompany these developments. In these circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that the freedom the government now enjoys in the making of foreign policy might not endure much longer. It seems likely that it will be constrained by looming economic difficulties and growing public criticism.

#### **D.) Rough Waters Ahead?**

In his speech at the opening of the Sixty-Sixth Session of the UN General Assembly in late-September 2011, Erdogan presented Turkey as a leading power in the Middle East, prepared to assist the post-Arab Spring governments as they begin to chart their future. As expected, he strongly endorsed the Palestinian demand for national self-determination, declaring that Turkey's

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<sup>51</sup> That this deficit was unexpected is suggested by the most recent forecast available from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In October 2010, the IMF predicted that the current account deficit would hover around five percent until 2012 when it would increase to 5.6 percent, rising to 6.1 percent in 2015. See International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, October 2010, accessed on 27 September 2011 at [www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2010/02/weodata/index.aspx](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2010/02/weodata/index.aspx).

<sup>52</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report – Turkey* (London, September 2011), pp. 7-9.

<sup>53</sup> David Goldman, "Instant obsolescence of the Turkish model," *Asia Times Online*, 10 August 2011.

support was unconditional. It would have come as no surprise to most listeners familiar with the state of the bilateral relationship that his remarks about Israel were very critical, and he accused it of being the principal roadblock to regional peace. All that had been heard before, most recently in his remarks to the Arab League in Cairo only a few days earlier. Erdogan also accused the West of hypocrisy in imposing sanctions on Iran for the pursuit of nuclear weapons capability when Israel already has such weapons in its arsenal. Again, that comment was consistent with long-held positions of the AKP government. At the same time, however, he signalled that the current diplomatic dustup with Israel was not a clash of irreconcilable national interests and he asserted that Turkey has never “pursued hostile and confrontational policies against any other country”. And, while he maintained the position that restoration of relations was dependent upon the receipt of an apology from Tel Aviv, his speech was largely free of the threatening rhetoric that has so frequently characterised the comments by Turkish officials during the past six weeks or so.

The last set of comments must, therefore, have seemed out-of-place to those tracking developments in the region. But such speeches are often more than just political theatre and are sometimes an extension of diplomacy. If that is the case, why the change in tone? There are several possible explanations. Erdogan, the thrice elected leader of the Middle East’s only Muslim democracy, perhaps wanted to present himself as a serious minded, mature leader from a region that has undergone great turmoil. A measured tone is an important element in a leader’s gravitas, and staking out a global leadership position cannot be accomplished without such an attribute. Equally possible, Erdogan might have wanted to dispel concern in foreign capitals that his threatening rhetoric was incompatible with the types of equal partnerships his government has sought outside the Middle East with, among other players, the United States and the European Union. Or, it is also possible that the speech was a political manoeuvre to position his country in regional developments, prepared and delivered in the full knowledge of what was to follow, namely the confrontation at the General Assembly between the Palestinian Authority’s demand for independence and Israel’s opposition. And, of course, none of these are mutually exclusive in current Turkish policy. While the outreach in the region has seen an increase by Ankara in offers of humanitarian and other forms of assistance, it has not entailed many new expenses. At a very low cost, Turkey has been able to put distance between itself and Israel, while significantly increasing the prestige it has and hopes to build upon in the Middle East and within the Muslim world. And because the policy has been relatively cost-free, Ankara probably believes that turning down the rhetoric on one occasion can just as easily, and perhaps quite strategically, be ramped up on another.

There is, however, a risk that still attends the brinkmanship Ankara is playing with Tel Aviv. Erdogan has not backed away from his announcement that Turkish naval vessels will accompany any humanitarian relief vessel attempting to sail to Gaza. If that continues to be Turkish policy, and is ultimately implemented, an armed clash seems possible: even if Ankara might not really desire it to happen. Adopting a hard-line position to force a concession from an opponent is, after all, the hallmark of brinkmanship; but knowing the limits of what is achievable is another. To avoid a clash at sea, either Turkey must not follow through on its threat to use its navy to support “humanitarian vessels” or Israel must not use force to prevent their breaking the Gaza blockade. As neither government seems willing to alter course at present, there is an understandable anxiety that events could spin out of control. While it is true that the Erdogan government has a

history of “talking tough” (e.g., with the Assad regime in Syria) and then backing away from enforcing its demands, its more critical stance toward Israel over the Palestinian issue has been popular at home. Despite very clear indications that the public is not fully behind the current hard-line position, backing down might be perceived as incompatible with national honour and the government could feel compelled, again by public opinion, to maintain a course that exacerbates the situation. Likewise, while there are prominent voices in Israel demanding a peaceful resolution to the dispute with Turkey, the Netanyahu government is on record that the concessions being demanded would undermine national security.

It is simply too early to tell what will happen should another flotilla set sail, but in the absence of an innovative diplomatic solution the odds are not good that a confrontation at sea can be avoided. What might be proposed to avoid such an outcome? Erdogan’s repeated demand for a public (and humiliating) apology will be difficult for Israel to reconcile with its own national security interests, especially now as it knows that Ankara no longer ranks as a trusted partner, let alone a strategic ally. It is not, however, impossible to imagine some form of an apology being offered. US officials seem to have endorsed that approach in discussions with the Netanyahu government, most recently in the early-October 2011 visit to the region of Defense Secretary Panetta.<sup>54</sup> Still, an apology and an offer of compensation to relatives of those who died during the Gaza Flotilla Incident would not necessarily resolve the more pressing problem of Turkish naval support to any future effort to break through Israel’s blockade of Gaza.

The apology might nonetheless restore some civility to bilateral relations and that development would naturally invite the possibility of new and perhaps broader negotiations. It is difficult, however, to know what Israel could offer that might deter the Turkish government from following through on its threat to support a challenge to the blockade. There is little from Israel that the current Turkish government wants.<sup>55</sup> And, therein, lies the problem. While Turkey might not want a military clash with Israel – and this author thinks it is very unlikely that it does -- the fact that it is building its new regional profile on the basis of leading on issues such as Gaza, does not afford it much of an opportunity to change course. One possible solution to the problem is for Ankara to find some quiet means to prevent a second flotilla from sailing. Another would be simply to pay no attention if another somehow sails, as happened in early-November, when an attempt to run the blockade included a Canadian ship, the *Tahrir*, that was boarded by Israeli naval personnel. In either approach, the challenge to Ankara is to obscure (or better still, to completely hide) any possible ties to the government itself, for it would lose face if such a role ever became known. But there is always a possibility that, having staked out a hardline position, Erdogan will be expected to play that card regardless. That did not happen in the case of the *Tahrir*, most likely because that incident was relatively low profile compared to that of the year before. That might not happen again. The difficulty of avoiding an unwanted escalation of hostilities with Israel illustrates how, to a considerable degree, Ankara has become a prisoner of

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<sup>54</sup> During his visit, Panetta urged Israeli leaders to “re-establish relations with countries like Turkey and Egypt.” Given that Ankara has repeatedly stated that a precondition of rebuilding relations is a formal apology, Panetta would seem to have implicitly urged such an approach. See “Israel ‘increasingly isolated’ in a volatile region, Panetta says,” *Associated Press*, 3 October 2011.

<sup>55</sup> One reviewer of this paper suggested a possible exception to this argument, namely that Ankara has relied on the opposition of the pro-Israel lobby to support its efforts in Washington to prevent recognition of the Armenian genocide. The rupture in the relationship with Israel obviously means that support will no longer be available.

its own inflated ambitions. As Turkey lacks the capabilities – military and economic -- to unilaterally assume the leading position in the region that the Ottomans once ruled, it can only acquire comparable authority with the consensus of those it seeks to lead. To be seen to back down from a confrontation with Israel, when standing up to Tel Aviv is highly popular throughout the Middle East, would threaten Turkey's current high standing in the "Arab Street" upon which it depends to exercise its soft power throughout the region.

### **E.) Implications for Relations with Western Partners**

Naturally all of this invites a consideration of what these events possibly hold for Turkey's relations with its European partners and its allies in NATO. The Erdogan government has stated that it continues to value very highly its membership in NATO: it has actively contributed to the mission in Afghanistan and it announced its acceptance of the NATO missile defence system the same day that it began implementing the new round of sanctions on Israel. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that Ankara believes that it can insulate its membership in NATO from the consequences of its regional policies in the Middle East, in this instance the confrontation with Israel. This suggests two general conclusions. First, that Turkey's view of NATO places an emphasis on it being as an alliance rather than a community of values. This means that narrowly-defined self-interest, rather than a larger commitment to normative principles, predominates in Ankara's perspective of NATO's utility. Second, it suggests that it no longer regards the US, generally acknowledged to be the leader of the Alliance and a regional Power in its own right, as a logical or even the primary partner in addressing its Middle East security concerns. Whether this latter assessment is based on a perspective of the current administration in Washington or, more generally, of the relative decline in US power is difficult to gauge. What is nonetheless obvious is that Ankara is unconcerned about the implications for NATO of its regional activism. And, of course, a corollary of this conclusion is that, for Ankara, partnerships with other powers – within the region or farther afield -- to advance key interests not only present themselves as logical, but are assessed as far more acceptable than was the case previously. This attitude portends possible frictions with Turkey's traditional Western partners. The belief in some NATO circles that greater activism in the Mediterranean littoral is a necessary component of the Alliance's new legitimacy could run headlong into Ankara's opposition.

Likewise, Ankara's understanding of its relationship with the EU has changed. Far from the image of a supplicant waiting anxiously for the privilege of joining, Turkey now sees itself as engaged in a variety of relationships of which the EU is one, albeit important, but not essential to the well-being of the country or its people. So, while it will continue to maintain its application for EU membership, past eagerness to institute more reforms to advance that aim are no longer likely: demands from Brussels to do so will be resented by many in the AKP and regarded as just more evidence of European hypocrisy. The creeping authoritarianism of the Erdogan government would seem to be the best evidence of this new attitude. And, of course, frictions with individual European capitals will continue to accumulate, most often surrounding the issue of Turkish minorities in Europe. The recent calls by Erdogan to the Turkish community in Germany to resist assimilation, alongside earlier demands for a separate Turkish university and education system, exemplify the self-confidence of the AKP leadership.<sup>56</sup> As the economic problems in Europe

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<sup>56</sup> "Erdogan in favour of Turkish Schools, Universities in Germany," *DeutscheWelle*, 8 February 2008 and Helen Pidd, "Germany hits back after Turkish PM tells immigrants to resist assimilation," *The Guardian*, 28 February 2011.

intensify and greater attention on social issues, including immigration, is demanded by disgruntled publics, Ankara's demands for special treatment for Muslim minorities can only further complicate the dialogue with Brussels.

From an international security perspective, there is also a growing divide between Europe and Turkey over how to conduct foreign affairs. While many European states are very critical of Israeli policy on the Palestinian issue, none have supported Ankara's recent actions. Many European political leaders are convinced that the harsh rhetoric that Erdogan's government has been using is designed to shore up its support at home, and a few have spoken of a belief that Ankara is pursuing a larger regional agenda. Nevertheless, there is a new wariness of Turkey's willingness to brandish, if so far only rhetorically, a "big stick" in its international policies.<sup>57</sup> The dispute with Israel is underscoring European concerns about differences with Turkey over Cyprus and energy development in the Aegean, and most especially about the increasingly Islamist complexion to Turkish politics and society. The more the Erdogan government asserts that it is different from its predecessors, and that it is willing to be more assertive in defending Turkish and Muslim interests regionally, the more Europe will be urged by events to focus on those differences.

From Ankara's perspective, none of this will come as a surprise. Turkish officials are long accustomed to having their country viewed by European and North American governments in a critical light. In the case of the AKP, those differences tend to be viewed as either bigotry resistant to change or just plainly self-serving and designed to keep Turkey in its place. In a March 2011 interview with the German centre-right daily, *Die Welt*, Davutoglu gave voice to that attitude when he noted the hypocrisy of the EU while claiming that Europeans did not really understand "the new Turkey".<sup>58</sup> By themselves, such frictions with Western partners would probably dissipate with the passage of time. In the context of the profound transformation underway in the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey's assertiveness and its willingness to challenge older understandings of regional affairs is however generating new anxieties. The suspicion that under the AKP Turkey is drifting away from the West can only become more widespread.

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<sup>57</sup> See Annett Meiritz, "EU Politicians Slam Turkey's Anti-Israel Course," *Der Spiegel*, 14 September 2011, and "EC calls on Turkey to refrain from threats," *Athens News*, 19 September 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Near the end of the interview, Davutoglu stated that "You do not understand the new Turkey. Turkey is more than just a hard Power. It is a rising soft Power. (...) Oh, we understand you very well. We just do not understand your double standards." The latter comment was made with regard to Turkey's stalled application for EU membership, long a sore spot in Ankara's relations with Brussels. Boris Kalnoky, "Ahmet Davutoglu: "Manche Europäer verstehen die neue Türkei nicht"," *Die Welt*, 6 März 2011.

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