



# After Turkey's June Elections

## A Review of Avenues for U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy Cooperation in the Wake of Turkey's Parliamentary Elections

Michael Werz, Caroline Wadhams, Matthew Duss, and Sarah Margon June 2011

---

### Introduction

Turkey's parliamentary elections earlier this month set the stage for how Turkish leaders pursue reform at home and approach the many challenges and opportunities in the country's tumultuous neighborhood. How this all plays out will have important implications for U.S. foreign policy in the region. Why? Because U.S.-Turkish relations as they relate to the many conflicts in the region may well be key to addressing these conflicts effectively to the benefit of both countries.

As expected, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party, or AKP, its Turkish acronym, will stay in charge with a solid majority in the Turkish parliament. But because he and his party were unable to meet the two-thirds requirement needed to change the constitution, Erdogan will need the support of the opposition to pursue the key reforms of the constitution, such as changing to a presidential system.

The opposition consolidated its position. The social-democratic Republican People's Party, or CHP, expanded its voter base by over 3 million compared to the dismal results of the last election in 2007 when the party garnered the votes of only 19 percent of the electorate. And importantly, the Kurds dramatically increased their representation in the parliament due to a strong showing of the Kurdish candidates in the southeast of the country; the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, or BDP, will now have 36 seats and a voice in what will be a core issue of the constitutional reform debate: the Kurdish minority conflict.

The recent election carries international implications, too. Turkey's success on the global stage over the past decade has brought added responsibilities for its leadership. As a regional power Turkey has to wrestle not only with a rapidly changing environment in the Eastern Mediterranean but also with accusations of double standards because of its strong criticism of Israel and its initial silence when it came to atrocities committed in Libya and Syria.

These predicaments challenge Turkish foreign policies, which have already undergone a tremendous conversion over the past eight years, mainly driven by Turkey's economic outreach to its Arab neighbors, to northern and sub-Saharan Africa, and to the Balkans. This economic success story alongside increasing civil liberties at home—independent of continuing concerns about press and religious freedom—have raised the visibility of Turkish politics in the region and beyond.

A recent [survey by the Turkish Economic and Social Policies Foundation](#), or TESEV, documents these changing perceptions in the region. Turkey's approval rating in seven Arab countries is above 75 percent, and its role as a mediator is seen positively, even though—or, some would say, because of—its relationship with Israel continues its downward spiral.

Perceptions of the U.S.-Turkish relationship by Turks are murkier. While less than one third of the Turkish population see the United States as being “friendly toward Turkey,” three quarters believe that Turkey is friendly toward the United States and Turkey's regional neighbors. Yet in an apparent contradiction from the first result, over half of the Turks see the U.S. bilateral relationship in a positive light, and an impressive 67 percent think that the Obama administration is contributing positively toward international stability. If these numbers are correct, it appears that there is public support for a stronger U.S.-Turkish relationship.

These data indicate that regional perceptions of Turkey are an important key to understanding Turkey's emerging influence in international relations in the wake of this month's elections. Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, who directs TESEV's foreign policy program, argues that based on its [regional survey](#) Turkey is not only the most popular country in the region but also “the only country that gained ground while all the other countries were losing popularity.”

The rebellions in North Africa and the Middle East have only increased Turkey's strategic relevance for the international community. And the fact that many states in the region see international politics mainly through the prisms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the nuclear armament of Iran further enhances the country's standing given the recurring populist attacks against Israel by members of the Erdogan government. By becoming a regional actor, Turkey enters the realm of realpolitik and the world of double standards, even though the often moralizing official rhetoric may say otherwise. Turkey's hesitancy to turn on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his bloody crack-down on democracy protestors is just one of a growing number of dilemmas Turkey will face pitting its strategic interests and political values against one another.

In the long run, this development may open up more opportunities for pragmatic cooperation with the United States. Policymakers in both countries often say that in 90 percent of the cases U.S. and Turkish strategic interests overlap, but in reality the two govern-

ments look at the world from quite different angles. This issue brief will explore the most important opportunities for U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the region to demonstrate how important President Obama's renewed efforts to improve U.S.-Turkish relations are to stability and security in the region.

---

## Turkish economic expansion in the region

Economic growth is an important factor in determining influence abroad. Turkey's economic growth and increasing exports, especially out of central and eastern Anatolia, where the rapidly growing city of Gaziantep is a hub in the center of the new Levant, have influenced and shaped its foreign policy.

In central and eastern Turkey over 20 cities now generate over \$1 billion of trade each, and emerging small- and medium-sized businesses in formerly neglected parts of the country are aggressively developing new markets abroad. Their products, many of which are in construction and semi-advanced industries, such as textiles, are hugely successful in the greater Middle East. Turkish companies are managing a substantial part of the reconstruction work in northern Iraq. Syria is another major frontier of Turkish trade expansion, as the 2004 Free Trade Agreement preceded a quadrupling of Turkish exports since then. Turkey has also quadrupled trade with sub-Saharan Africa in the past three years.

All of these developments are a clear indicator that Turkey's evolving foreign policy has a lot less to do with "neo-Ottoman" desires than with very practical economic ties to the region. Internal shifts within Turkey have contributed to the emergence of a middle class in parts of the country where it has not existed before, and this transformation has direct consequences for the way the country positions itself in the region.

These important internal changes facilitate and drive Turkey's new foreign policy, which is "both a blessing and a curse for the country" as Mensur Akgün director of the Global Political Trends Center in Istanbul noted during a recent [discussion](#) at the Center for American Progress. The new foreign policy is a blessing because it greatly enhances Turkey's regional influence and economic ties, but those policies can become a curse because no regional actor can maintain consistent standards and moral high ground as the Turkish government often pretends.

---

## Distant cooperation: Afghanistan and Pakistan

Turkey is an important partner to the United States in its efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and create peace in the region. Its long-standing historical ties to Afghanistan and Pakistan and Turkey's membership in NATO enables it to serve as trusted interlocutor between the NATO coalition and Afghanistan, and between Afghanistan and Pakistan, whose relationship remains strained.

As a contributing member to NATO, it has approximately 1,800 noncombat troops in Afghanistan and is the lead for the Regional Command of the International Security Assistance Force—the U.N.-mandated international force to assist the newly established Afghan Transitional Authority—in Kabul. Turkey has commanded ISAF on two occasions (June 2002-February 2003 and February-August 2005).<sup>1</sup> It has assisted in training both the Afghan army and police, built and now runs the Police Training and Education Center in Afghanistan, provides significant support to the National Military Academy in Afghanistan, and recently established a training center for Afghan National Police in Turkey.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond security assistance, Turkey provides development assistance to Afghanistan, serving as the lead country for two provincial reconstruction teams in Wardak and Jawzjan in central and northern Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> In 2009 alone, Turkey spent almost \$100 million in development assistance and has committed \$300 million in nonmilitary aid.<sup>4</sup> It has built schools and health clinics around Afghanistan, supported building Afghanistan's justice system and infrastructure, and provided training for Afghan government officials.

One of its most important functions is the diplomatic role it has served in reducing tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Beginning in 2007, it launched a trilateral summit process, bringing together leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan to discuss areas of concern. Five meetings have been held. Through these meetings, the two countries have established agreements on combating terrorism, sharing intelligence, and increasing economic cooperation; the three countries recently agreed to conduct joint military exercises.<sup>5</sup>

Turkey may play an increasingly important role in actively supporting a political settlement in Afghanistan, which the Obama administration has recently begun to pursue aggressively. As Afghan officials ramp up their outreach to insurgents to undertake a process of negotiation, they have proposed Turkey as a diplomatic address for the Taliban insurgents.

Turkey combines a number of attributes that may enable it to serve as a bridge between NATO-ISAF, Afghan insurgents, and regional players during a negotiation process. As a Muslim-majority nation governed by a democratically elected Islamist government, it potentially can serve as a more credible interlocutor for citizens in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the region, many of whom fear that the United States and NATO-ISAF have an anti-Muslim agenda. Because Turkey is a contributor to NATO but has not been a belligerent in the fighting, it may serve as a less controversial interlocutor than other parties to the coalition.

Moreover, as a member of NATO-ISAF with close ties to the United States and a track record of supporting the NATO mission in Afghanistan, it is a trusted partner to the United States and its allies. There is widespread consensus that any Afghan political set-

tlement will require regional support for its long-term sustainability. Countries such as Pakistan, India, Russia, the Central Asian states, and China will need to sign off on any political negotiation. The strained relations between Iran and the United States make it difficult for the United States to play the leading role in advancing a regional solution.

Turkey's improved relations with Iran due to Prime Minister Erdogan's outreach efforts may be critical in obtaining Iranian support for Afghanistan. Turkey's unique role as a bridge between the West, the Middle East, and South Asia make it a crucial partner for the United States in promoting a shared interest of peace in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

---

### An uneasy neighbor: Turkey's relationship with Iran

Under the government of Prime Minister Erdogan, Turkey has sought to strengthen its trade relationship with Iran, and to leverage this into a greater mediating role in terms of Iran's issues with the international community. While this mirrors Turkey's policies toward other countries in its region, the stakes and profile of this are necessarily higher with Iran, given the contentious nature of Iran's interactions with that community.

As with Turkey's larger foreign policy, the relationship with Iran is based to a considerable extent on expanding trade and avoiding conflicts that could limit Turkey's economic growth. Trade between the two countries topped \$10 billion last year, and this past September, Erdogan announced that Turkey intended to triple its trade volume with Iran over the next five years.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time as their economic cooperation grows, however, Turkey and Iran have also been competing for political influence and economic advantage within Iraq. While Turkey's economic influence since 2003 had been largely limited to northern Iraq—55 percent of foreign firms in Iraqi Kurdistan are from Turkey—Turkish companies have sought to expand elsewhere in the country.<sup>7</sup> In 2010, the Turkish national oil and gas company *Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı*, or TPAO, was awarded a major contract to develop the Siba gas field in southern Iraq, indicating its rising business profile.<sup>8</sup> In October, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki visited both Turkey and Iran, reportedly offering investment deals in an attempt to gain support for his bid to form a new government.<sup>9</sup>

Turkey also is competing with Iran in its recent use of the Palestinian issue to gain traction among Arabs and Muslims around the region and the world. While Prime Minister Erdogan's provocative statements on the issue, beginning with his walk-out on Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos after a heated disagreement over Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza have gained him public support around the Middle East, the Iranian regime has made the issue a central ideological plank of their regional appeal for three decades.<sup>10</sup>

Erdogan's statements, while clearly grounded in genuine beliefs, similarly serve to ingratiate Turkey with the Arab public around Middle East for the purpose of gaining greater access to new markets. It should go without saying, however, that this drastically limits Turkey's ability to serve as an intermediary between Israel and her neighbors.

Of considerable concern to U.S. policymakers is Turkey's stance on the Iranian nuclear issue. Shortly after Barack Obama won the presidential election in November 2008, Prime Minister Erdogan said in an interview that Turkey "could be very useful" in mediating the U.S.-Iran relationship, which Obama had campaigned on trying to improve.<sup>11</sup> While the Obama administration's engagement effort has not yielded an agreement between Iran and the so-called P5+1 (referring to the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) on Iran's nuclear program, Turkey has continued to attempt to present itself as a bridge-builder, trying to maintain good relations with both sides.

In May 2010, these efforts resulted in the announcement in Tehran of an Iranian-Turkish-Brazilian deal in which Iran agreed to swap out a portion of its nuclear fuel through Turkey.<sup>12</sup> Coming on the eve of a new United Nations Security Council Resolution implementing tough new sanctions on Iran (in which the Obama administration had put considerable effort), the deal was seen as an attempt by Iran to undercut the United States with Turkey's assistance. While this put some strain on U.S.-Turkish relations, and raised questions in Washington about Turkey's intentions with regard to Iran, Turkish leaders have repeatedly made clear that they are very concerned about the implications—for both security and for business—of a nuclear weapons capable Iran, and do not desire that outcome.

---

### A strategic partner: Turkey's policy initiative in the Western Balkans

Turkey's ambition and capability to reinvent itself as a player in the world is evident in the Western Balkans. This involvement encompasses the whole region, but is most evident in Bosnia-Herzegovina, whose progress toward full stability and membership in NATO and the European Union has stalled dangerously since a return to nationalist politics in 2006. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu launched an energetic diplomatic campaign to help get Bosnia back on track, whose flagship initiative was a trilateral diplomatic mission of Bosnian, Serb, and Turkish negotiators aimed at improving strained relations between the two former Yugoslav republics, and thereby Bosnia's own internal stability. As a part of this effort, President Abdullah Gül became the first Turkish President to visit Belgrade in over two decades. And visits by other senior officials, including the prime minister, to Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, and Macedonia followed.

Ultimately, Turkey convened five rounds of talks to stabilize bilateral relations between Serbia and Bosnia and restore diplomatic ties. As a result, the Serb parliament passed a resolution last March in which it apologized for the Srebrenica massacre of 1995, during which the army of the Serb Republic killed 8,000 Bosnians. In April of 2010

a trilateral summit between Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia was held in Istanbul where Turkish President Gül, Serbian President Boris Tadic, and Bosnian President Haris Silajdzic convened. The presidents and their foreign ministers adopted the Istanbul Declaration, which pledged stability in the region and reinforced Bosnia-Herzegovina's territorial integrity.

Turkey was also instrumental in convincing NATO to offer Bosnia a so-called Membership Action Plan, or MAP, which establishes criteria for countries seeking NATO membership, at an April, 2010 meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers, and has consistently an active regional diplomacy at the ambassadorial level. Through Europe's back door, in a political terrain where the European Union had not been successful, the Turkish foreign minister established his country as a relevant geopolitical partner of the transatlantic alliance. Given the current developments in Bosnia, where the threat of renewed ethnic violence is increasing, Turkey has a continuing role to play in the region. Its role is particularly important at a time when the attention of high-level U.S. diplomats and policymakers is focused on other parts of the world.

---

## Turkey's role in North Africa and the Middle East

Amid the unfolding political upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey is a key partner for the United States—despite Turkey's sometimes controversial role as both a NATO-member country and a regional conflict-resolution mediator. This internal tension was particularly obvious in the case of military intervention in Libya, where Turkish officials were quite public in their objection to NATO taking the lead role in action against Libya, while also calling on Col. Mohamar Qaddafi, publicly and unequivocally, to step down. Given how quickly events are changing throughout the region, in order to maximize opportunities a U.S.-Turkey alliance must promote shared interests and principles, which form such an important foundation for ongoing cooperation.

Perhaps most concerning to Turkey is the growing unrest in neighboring Syria, which is a direct challenge to the Turkish policy of “zero problems with its neighbors.” With the number of displaced Syrians fleeing to Turkey now reaching beyond 10,000, Ankara's once warm relationship with Damascus has become vocally critical. Indeed, just this week President Gul commented that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's speech on reform was “not enough,” and that Syria should transition to a multiparty system.

To highlight Turkey's geostrategic role in the region, Turkish ambassadors from countries across the Middle East and North Africa convened with representatives from many western countries and key multilateral organizations to discuss the ongoing turmoil and chart a path forward for Turkey's policy toward this tumultuous region. The “Turkish model” of transitioning to democracy—despite its many imperfections—may be an important example, or at the very least, a source of inspiration for countries such as Egypt and Tunisia that are now undergoing significant peaceful reforms.

As Turkey recalibrates its postelection policies, there are likely to be many opportunities for Turkey to side unambiguously with democracy advocates in the Middle East and North Africa over autocratic regimes. The waves of change still roiling the region could enhance Turkey's role as a critical regional player, while also contributing to an improved U.S.-Turkey partnership on a broad range of issues.

---

### Turkish democracy: An inward-oriented AKP and a "new CHP"

"Turkey's story can help rewrite the future of the Middle East to a more democratic region that respects the human dignity of all its citizens," CAP President and Chief Executive John D. Podesta recently argued. "But for Turkey to fulfill its potential as a leader in the region and in the world, it must maintain its commitment to democracy, not just when it's easy, but when it's hard."

Turkey's political spectrum is still undergoing a massive modernization. The ruling AKP continues to consolidate its power and develop from a broad coalition into a political party machine. The oppositional Republican Peoples Party, the CHP, is also undergoing a transformation under its new leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who is not a lifelong politician but has a long-time background in the Finance Ministry and the Social Security Administration. After many years of virtual absence CHP officials have recently rejoined the policy conversation in Washington, introducing their party as the "new CHP."

The list of candidates for the June 12 elections reflected these changes. Gone are old-guard representatives such as Onur Oymen and Sukru Elekdag. Pushing those politicians aside is significant. For years, Elekdag has been an important voice representing the CHP's resistance to the new Turkish foreign policy. In 2010, Akdag spoke out against important conciliatory meetings between the government and Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurds in Northern Iraq. He did so using language that recalled the deep-seated mistrust that many orthodox nationalists in Turkey feel toward their neighbors.<sup>13</sup>

Oymen's foreign policy positions are similar. He once announced that he would "tear up" the protocol agreement with Armenia if the CHP took power. Now, the "new CHP" will be represented in Washington more likely by people such as Deputy Chairman Umut Oran, who stands for a new generation of Turkish business men, and Gulsun Bilgehan Toker, the granddaughter of the second Turkish President Ismet Inonu. The former ambassadors Osman Koruturk and Faruk Logoglu were also part of the group that recently made the rounds in Washington.

These new actors hold promise for a new relationship between CHP and Washington. Koruturk has openly advocated for a new tone in relations with the United States and for turning over a new leaf with Tel Aviv. At home, he has broken ground for CHP by visiting the Greek and Armenian Patriarchs. The CHP still has a long road ahead, but this could be the start of something new.

From this perspective, the recent election was crucial. Henri J. Barkey of the Carnegie Endowment recently commented that if Kılıçdaroğlu is perceived as being victorious—an argument that can be made after the 26 percent his party garnered in the recent parliamentary elections—then “he could be emboldened to move the party in a more liberal and tolerant direction, much like European social-democratic parties. If he fails, the long knives will be out for him, and the CHP, having lost its nerve, will likely retreat back into its statist and nationalist shell.”<sup>14</sup>

The emergence of a new CHP will be an important element in constitutional reform and add valuable new voices to the exchange between Washington and Ankara. This could be especially important at a time when the governing AKP has pushed a substantial number of their foreign policy experts out of the ranks of parliament. These include experienced foreign policy experts such as Murat Mercan, the former chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee; Suat Kiniklioglu, the chairman of the Turkey-U.S. Interparliamentary Friendship Group; or Yasar Yakis, the chairman of the EU Harmonization Committee and a former minister of foreign affairs.

Other AKP politicians that not made the list include Erol Aslan Cebeci, the former chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; Vahit Erdem, the chairman of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Turkey Group; and Alaattin Buyukkaya, the chairman of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Turkey Group as well as a handful of others.

These internal political developments matter a great deal given Turkey’s central role in the current transformations in Northern Africa and parts of the Middle East. Increased political pluralism in Turkey will be an important factor in creating legitimacy for an emerging international player. The necessary constitutional reform process expected to begin soon has already been initiated with several reform proposals being discussed in Turkish society.

It is imperative that this process include as many segments from Turkish society as possible, including opposition parties and civil society groups. There is broad consensus among all these groups concerning the need for reform, yet as we witnessed after the results of the September referendum, which resulted in a number of constitutional changes some of which were controversial, a sizable minority is worried that the ruling party will monopolize the process.

The United States has a vital interest in the consolidation of a robust democratic anchor in the Middle East and northern Africa. Constitutional reform is an important element in this process. Even regardless of the outcome of constitutional reform, Turkey will be an important factor shaping the future of the region.

---

## Conclusion

As the Obama administration seeks to partner with the democratization movements in the Middle East and North Africa, the United States will increasingly benefit from a constructive Turkish foreign policy in the region. In 2009, President Obama spoke of forging a “model partnership” with Turkey. This partnership was to exemplify the potential for bilateral ties to thrive based on shared principles and goals. Today this partnership is more vital than ever as the United States and Turkey confront a shared set of challenges and opportunities across the region.

With the blooming of the Arab Spring, Turkey is now operating in new terrain where it faces the dilemmas inherent in reconciling its national interest with the democratic norms it seeks to uphold. The United States is seasoned in this area but bears scars on its reputation to prove it. As Turkey and the United States increasingly find themselves burdened with the same responsibilities and complex realities in the region, the importance of close cooperation become ever more apparent. The Obama administration has turned around what was a neglected alliance for too long; it is time to make the next steps now.

*Michael Werz and Caroline Wadhams are Senior Fellows with the National Security Team at the Center for American Progress, Matthew Duss is a Policy Analyst and Director of Middle East Progress at the Center, and Sarah Margon is the Associate Director of the Sustainable Security and Peacebuilding Initiative at the Center.*

---

## Endnotes

- 1 Carol Migdalovitz, “Turkey: Selected Foreign Policy Issues and U.S. Views” (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2010), available at <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/mideast/RL34642.pdf>.
- 2 “Afghanistan, Turkey sign bilateral agreement,” NATO Training Mission Afghanistan, March 13, 2011, available at <http://ntm-a.com/wordpress2/?p=922>.
- 3 “International Security Assistance Force: Troop numbers and contributions, Turkey,” available at <http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/turkey/index.php>.
- 4 Migdalovitz, “Turkey.”
- 5 “Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan set to hold joint urban warfare exercise,” Anadolu Agency, March 17, 2011, available at [http://www.aa.com.tr/index.php?option=com\\_haber&popup=hayrinti&haber\\_id=103031](http://www.aa.com.tr/index.php?option=com_haber&popup=hayrinti&haber_id=103031).
- 6 “Iran-Turkey trade to hit \$30b,” Mehr News Agency, February 15, 2011, available at <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1254622>; Joe Parkinson, “Turkey Aims to Triple Iran Trade, Despite International Sanctions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2010, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703440604575496031866586468.html>.
- 7 “Turkey and Iran Battle for Influence in Iraq,” *Iraq Business News*, December 11, 2010, available at <http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2010/12/11/turkey-and-iran-battle-for-influence-in-iraq/>.
- 8 “Iraq awards major contracts to develop gas fields,” BBC News, October 20, 2010, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11582702>.
- 9 “Turkey and Iran Battle for Influence in Iraq.”
- 10 Katrin Bennhold, “Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html>.
- 11 Sabrina Tavernise, “Turkey volunteers to mediate U.S.-Iran talks,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 2008, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/12/world/europe/12iht-12turkey.17731395.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/12/world/europe/12iht-12turkey.17731395.html?_r=1).
- 12 Parisa Hafezi, “Turkey, Brazil seal deal on Iran nuclear fuel swap,” Reuters, May 16, 2010, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/05/16/us-iran-nuclear-deal-idUSTRE64F29P20100516>.
- 13 Ali Aslan Kilic, “CHP to return to isolationist/nationalist policies if it comes to power,” *Today’s Zaman*, April 10, 2010.
- 14 Henri J. Barkey, “The Road to Turkey’s June Elections: Crises, Strategies, and Outcomes” (Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center).