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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

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## Turkey balances on shaky ground

By Reza Akhlaghi

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This month, the Turkish parliament approved a bill to clear more than 600,000 landmines along the Turkish-Syrian border that were planted in the 1950s to keep Kurdish separatists harbored by Syria from infiltrating into Turkish territory.

The bill was harshly criticized by [Turkey's](#) opposition parties, which said it undermined Turkey's national security. The cleaning project, which could also be opened to bidding from foreign companies, could cost as much as half a billion US dollars. Turkey claims that it is mandated to clear them by its signing of the 2003 Ottawa Treaty, which calls for a ban on anti-personnel landmines, but the reality is that the move is part of a strategic overhaul of the country's standing in the Muslim world.

Turkey's openness to Syria does not end with landmine cleanups. In late April, for the first time, Turkish and Syrian forces conducted joint military operations along the same mine-laden borders. [Israel](#), unsurprisingly, frowned on the joint exercise and thought it might be a harbinger of things to come, especially given Tel Aviv's close relations with Turkey, its only ally in the Muslim world. But the Turkish leadership is not naive enough to take sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict to the detriment of its strategic standing in a region that is being shaped by two wars and a rising Iran.

Turkey's gradual about-face regarding its strategic position vis-a-vis the Muslim world can be seen as part of a soul-searching exercise that began with the rise of Islamists in the government in the early 1990s and the [United States](#) invasion of Iraq in 2003. This soul-searching was born partly out of frustration with the country's fiercely secular elite, who for decades tried to integrate Turkey into the European family of nations and change the country's demography and cultural attitudes toward religion and its role in politics.

### A religious awakening

Turkey's deeply unbalanced economic development in the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by the relentless modernization of major urban and western coastal cities such as [Istanbul](#) and Ankara at the expense of economic development in rural areas. The growth in urban centers

prompted millions of deeply conservative villagers to migrate to cities with the hope of upward social and economic mobility. This trend led to the mushrooming of shantytowns and slums built by migrant villagers, who in the 1980s and 1990s gradually integrated into the social and economic fabric of urban centers, forming a new middle class with a penchant for a greater role for religion in politics.

This new middle class, with its capitalist aspirations and support for Islamic-oriented parties, proved instrumental in the 1996 victory of Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), Turkey's first Islamist party since the republic's birth in 1923. Erbakan's anti-Israeli rhetoric, his choice of Iran as the first foreign state visit and his D-8 project (the developing eight) to bring political and economic unity among eight large Muslim countries, frightened Turkey's ruling secular class and ultimately led to his downfall by a constitutional order in 1997. But the elimination of Erbakan and his Welfare party did not result in the disappearance of pro-Islamic sentiments in the country.

### **Welfare's metamorphosis into the AKP**

Following the Welfare Party's ouster, under Erbakan's mentorship, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998, transformed the party into a more secular and modern version of its former self, re-branding it under the new name, Justice and Development Party, or Adalet and Kalkinma Partisi (AKP). Erdogan has been in power since 2002. Abdullah Gul, a former Turkish foreign minister who also belongs to the AKP, is Turkey's current president.

Both Erdogan and Gul are married to conservative Muslim women who observe the *hijab* (Islamic head cover), becoming Turkey's first first ladies to cover their head in public. While the entry of head-covered women into the presidential palace was viewed by the secular elite as an outright affront to Turkey's secular principles and a stain on its international image, it was welcomed by the rest of the Muslim/Arab world as a sign of a shift in Turkey's relations with the Muslim world.

The fear of the secular elite in Turkey was that the AKP might shrewdly follow Iran's footsteps in turning Turkey into an anti-Western fundamentalist state, which would subsequently lead to the loss of their bureaucratic and economic privileges. Hardline segments of the secular elite, therefore, resorted to a smear campaign to demonize the AKP and its top leadership. The campaign included publications by a hardline secular and ultra-nationalist journalist, Ergun Poyraz, who claimed President Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan were agents of Israel's Mossad bent on destroying the Turkish republic. Poyraz is currently under arrest for his association with Ergenekon, an ultra nationalist organization tied to subversive activities against the state.

In addition to the pro-Islamic vote, there was another factor behind AKP's rise to power - economic mismanagement by predecessor governments. The mismanagement of the economy reached its climax with a massive banking scandal under Mesut Yilmaz, a three-time prime minister in the 1990s. The scandal wiped out Turkish savings and sparked a complete economic collapse.

### **What Turkey wants?**

Under AKP rule, the Turkish leadership decided to [map](#) a new course for its foreign policy vis-a-vis the Middle East and Central Asia while pursuing its efforts for accession to the European Union. The hallmark of this new course was the formulation of a homegrown foreign policy. The strategy was multi-pronged, with the chief objective of making Turkey a

linchpin of peace and stability in the Muslim world.

The question is, how will the leadership in Ankara achieve this goal without antagonizing regional and international players? The following offers a glimpse into the main components of this multi-pronged strategy.

- **Iran:** Forge closer ties with Iran; mediate between Tehran and [Washington](#) on the restoration of ties between the two; help resolve Iran's nuclear program.
- **Arab world:** Adopt the role of an honest broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict; bring about economic and political stability in Iraq without antagonizing Iran; use Turkey's status in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a stabilizing force in Afghanistan.
- **Central Asia:** Secure a strategic role in the evolving energy politics of Central Asia; transport of energy to Europe from the Caucasus.

As the lofty nature of the above goals suggests, Ankara has its strategic plate full and its work cut out for it, to say the least. In this new strategic picture it is important for Turkey not be seen by Muslims as a country that every now and then swings from secularism to Islamic revivalism.

To achieve that goal, the AKP leadership has taken concrete actions. In an interview with the London-based Arabic newspaper al-Hayat, Turkish President Gul clearly indicated his country's desire to help mend relations between Syria and Lebanon as well as those between the US and Iran. Turkey's securing of a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council in October 2008 is one step toward being recognized as a power to be reckoned with and as a country with a strong desire to bring and secure stability in the region.

### **Dealing with Persians**

For much of Iran's post-revolutionary period, relations between Ankara and Tehran were characterized by a deep sense of distrust, wide ideological divides and frequent accusations of meddling in each other's internal affairs. With AKP in power, relations improved markedly on nearly all fronts, though Iran's clerical theocracy and Turkey's secularism, as two systems of governance, are far from being passionately in love with each other.

### **[Turkey's](#)**

continued purchase of Iranian natural gas, much to the chagrin of Americans, followed by its refusal to partake in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent post-war fears of resurgent Kurdish separatism brought the two countries closer together. The two countries even supported each other in their military incursions into the Iraqi territories against Kurdish separatists.

Today Turkey is aiming to mediate between Iran and the US, pushing for a possible rapprochement. It also wants to play a role in reducing tensions in Iran's continuing nuclear saga. This approach helps Turkey shoot two birds with one stone: it confers Turkey with great credibility among the Israelis and Arabs alike, who are concerned about Iran's rise in the region and continue to look at Iran's nuclear program with deep suspicion.

The absence of tensions between the US and Iran also helps Turkey with its ambitious goal of becoming an energy transport route from Central Asia and Iran to [Western Europe](#). Iran is also viewed by Turkey as a strategic alternative source of energy to [Russia](#)

, should Russia decide to use energy as a bargaining chip against the NATO bloc.

### **Dealing with Arabs: Islam as a force of unity**

Since the creation of the Turkish republic in 1923 by Kemal Mustafa Ataturk on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, Arab politicians and intellectuals have viewed Turkey as a subordinate Western client in denial of its glorious Islamic past. Arabs have also looked with a sense of shock and disbelief at Turkey's decades-long relentless efforts to become part of Europe both culturally and economically. These Arab views of [Turks](#) and the Turkish government's efforts to distance themselves from the entire Muslim world led to the formation of a great divide between Arabs and Turks.

Under AKP rule Turkey's efforts to reverse the trend in Turkish-Arab relations started with gestures of diplomatic outreach and continued with concrete actions to forge new economic as well as defense ties with the Arab world. A turning point in Turkish Arab relations came with the state visit by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to Turkey in 2006 in which the Saudi King openly expressed willingness to seek Turkish assistance in expanding Saudi-European ties and in the construction of massive development projects, an implicit show of trust in Turkey as a strong Muslim state.

The Saudi visit gave Turkey a handsome diplomatic payoff, following Erdogan's [tour](#) of Arab countries in 2005. Arabs have also welcomed Turkey's secret attempts to mediate between the Israelis and Syrians. The Saudis, also known for their allergy to anything Iranian and their fear of the Persianization of the region, have also hoped that Turkey's mediation between the Israelis and Syrians will result in rifts in the Syrian-Iranian alliance.

Another significant show of willingness by Turkey to expand its influence in the Arab world was the visit to [Istanbul](#) in early May by the militant Shi'ite Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his entourage of more than 70 people. During his visit, Sadr met with both Erdogan and Gul.

In the light of continued enmity between Tehran and [Washington](#), Muqtada's visit to Turkey can be seen as Turkey's determination to mediate and resolve differences between Americans and their remaining enemies in Iraq and bring about stability to the war-ravaged country.

Worried about continued Iranian influence in the region, Arabs are open to warming trends in Turkish-Arab ties as most Turks, similar to Arabs, follow the Sunni branch of Islam, an added counterweight against Iranian ascendancy in the region. But Turkey does not want to be in the anti-Iranian camp; nor can it afford to, given its growing ties with Iran in energy trade. For now, Turkey uniquely remains the only Western ally with good relations with all actors in the Middle East and in light of Obama administration's efforts to repair ties with the Muslim world, it is a great asset that the US can bank on.

### **Central Asia: the geopolitics of energy**

Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of its satellite republics, Turkey has put enormous effort into carving out a strategic position for itself in the region's economic development. Today Turkey exports Iraqi crude oil from the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik pipeline in its southeastern border to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, where it is shipped to refineries in Europe and the US.

Eastward in the Caucasus region, via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, Turkey exports one million barrels of oil per day from the former Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and

Georgia. The BTC pipeline carries Azeri oil from the Chirag-Guneshli fields to Turkey's Ceyhan port.

Turkey is intent on turning itself into a critical component of the evolving Euro-Asian energy infrastructure and is now facing competing influence from Washington, Moscow and Tehran in a game of inclusion and exclusion. For example, Turkey agreed to construct the Tabriz-Erzurum pipeline, which carries natural gas from Iran to Turkey. Iran remains Turkey's second biggest source of energy after Russia.

The Nabucco pipeline is another project that is a testimony to Turkey's determination to become an integral part of the emerging Euro-Asian energy infrastructure. Nabucco is a 3,300 kilometer natural gas pipeline that starts from Turkmenistan, passes through Azerbaijan and Iran and terminates in the Turkish city of Erzurum, bordering Iran. From Erzurum the product is to be distributed to Western Europe.

### **A balance between East and West**

Since its founding as a republic, Turkey's relationship with the West can be characterized by a sense of envy and an urge to catch up. The Turkish republic has had both right and left wing governments that took secularism to an extreme and in the process isolated Islamists and portrayed them as a threat to Turkey's secular principles. Over the past eight decades as a secular republic, and compared to its Sunni brethren in the Arab world, Turkey has demonstrated enormous economic and social progress. It is an economic powerhouse in the region that is more advanced than most of Europe's former eastern bloc states.

Today Turkey strives to benefit from its position in Europe as an emerging economic powerhouse while forging new relationships and partnerships in the Muslim world with both Arab states as well as with Iran, irrespective of the latter's stormy relationship with Europe and the US. For Turkey, maintaining close economic and political ties with various players is a long-term strategic asset that it can leverage for regional stability. These ties help first and foremost the country's continued economic prosperity.

The revival of Turkey's relations with the Muslim world is taking place at a crucial time in the Middle East, where forces of change are making themselves increasingly felt with the potential to impact Turkey's emerging relationship with Arabs and Iranians alike.

Obama's new approach to the Muslim world, the defeat of Hezbollah in Lebanon's recent elections, and the post-election turmoil in Iran are all bound to seriously impact the AKP's ability to successfully garner domestic support for its Islamic oriented agenda. AKP faces formidable challenges within the military establishment and should it forge closer ties with the Muslim world at the expense of its secular principles, it could face the ire of the army and hardline secular nationalists. The future of AKP's Islamic agenda is at the mercy of unfolding events in the wider Middle East.