*Turkey, Past and Future*

# The Problem with Turkey's "Zero Problems"

by Ilias I. Kouskouvelis

Under the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), Turkey's foreign policy has been associated with the prescriptions and efforts of three men: Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Abdullah Gül, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Davutoğlu, a former international relations professor, has been the most articulate exponent of the troika's ideas, penning perhaps the most authoritative summary of its worldview in his 2001 *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth)[1] and coining its foremost article of faith: a "zero-problems policy" with Turkey's neighbors because Ankara "wants to eliminate all the problems from her relations with neighbors or at least to minimize them as much as possible."[2]

This might all be well and good if such words were supported by actions. But Davutoğlu has also described Turkey as a "heavyweight wrestler," hinting that it may use "the maximum of its abilities" when dealing with its neighboring "middleweight wrestlers."[3] A survey of Ankara's relations with these "middleweight wrestlers" reveals its "zero problems policy" to be little more than a cover for the AKP's reasserted "neo-Ottoman" ambitions.

## THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Achieving a zero problems status with Greece and Cyprus would seem to be the most difficult goal for Ankara to attain, given both countries' painful history with Turkey.

Even if one could put aside the long and tortuous past—from the Greek war of independence of the 1820s, to the 1923 uprooting of Greeks from Asia Minor, to sporadic crises over Aegean islands (1976, 1987, 1996), to the continuing standoff over air space and territorial waters—the

**Ilias I. Kouskouvelis** is professor of international relations at the University of Macedonia, Greece, and director of the Laboratory of International Relations and European Integration. The author thanks Nikolaos Raptopoulos, Alexander Koutsoukis, and Revecca Pedi for their comments.

1 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik. Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001).

2 "Policy of Zero Problems with Our Neighbors," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Ankara, accessed Sept. 21, 2012.

3 Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, p. 147.

*The primary author of Turkey's deeply problematic "zero problems" foreign policy is Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (right), seen here with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The main thrust of Davutoğlu's writing is a deep conviction in the incompatibility of the West and the Islamic world and resentment of the West for its attempt to impose its values and political system on the rest of the world.*

AKP's rise to power has exacerbated, not allayed, tensions.

Far from following a zero problems policy with Greece, Turkey maintains existing problems and adds new ones: It has made alleged violations of the Muslim minority's rights in Western Thrace an item on the Islamic Conference's agenda[4] and has muddied the waters over what constitutes Greece's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) by questioning the role of the Greek island of Kastelorizo (one mile off Turkey's coast) in determining that EEZ. And Davutoğlu's ambitions did not stop here:

> The security of the Balkans is increasingly identified with the security considerations of Turkey's western border. The security zone that has been established in eastern Thrace during the Cold War should be extended to the west with multilateral and bilateral agreements which should be made on a Balkan level.[5]

These are not mere words. Ankara has recently signed a military cooperation agreement with Albania, allowing docking privileges for Turkish warships at Durës, thereby marking the return of the Turkish navy to the Adriatic Sea after centuries.[6] The press has reported that Turkey is responsible for the cancellation of an agreement between Athens and Tirana over the delimitation of maritime zones,[7] and Turkey has also initiated major programs of military assistance to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, a state with which Greece is in dispute over the use of the name "Macedonia." Finally, Turkey continues to flood Greece and the European Union with tens of thousands of mostly Muslim illegal immigrants.[8]

Meanwhile, the already fraught relations with Cyprus have worsened. Turkey not only works against ending the continued and illegal occupation of the northern half of the island but seems bent on increasing problems. Such behavior is not all that surprising considering Davutoğlu's belief:

> It is not possible for a country that neglects Cyprus to have a decisive say in the global and regional politics … Even if there was not one Muslim Turk there, Turkey had to maintain a Cyprus issue. No country can stay indifferent toward such an island, located in the heart of its very own vital space … Turkey needs to see the strategic advantage which it obtained

4 See, for example, "On the situation of the Turkish Muslim Minority in Western Thrace, Greece," res. 3/33-M, 33rd Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM), Baku, June 19-21, 2006; "On the Situation of the Turkish Muslim Minority of Western Thrace, Greece," res. 3/34-MM, 34th ICFM, Islamabad, May 15-17, 2007.

5 Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, p. 124.

6 *The Sofia* (Bulgaria) *Echo*, June 3, 2010.

7 SKAI TV (Greece), accessed Oct. 1, 2012.

8 See "Annual Risk Analysis 2012," Frontex, European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union, Warsaw, Apr. 2012.

> … in the 1970s, not as the component of a Cyprus defense policy, directed toward maintaining the status quo, but as one of the diplomatic main supports of an aggressive maritime strategy.[9]

Small wonder, therefore, that Ankara reacted to the discovery of new energy resources in the Cypriot EEZ in a heavy-handed manner, stating that it too had rights and interests in the region and warning that support for the Republic of Cyprus on this issue would have consequences in future negotiations with Nikosia.[10] It attempted to stop Cyprus and Noble Energy, which planned to drill for natural gas off southern Cyprus's coast, from proceeding, then signed an agreement delimiting the continental shelf between itself and the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (recognized by no one except Ankara), so as to carry out its own energy exploration in the area. This culminated in Ankara dispatching a research vessel into the Cypriot EEZ to protect its "national interests," simultaneously ignoring U.S. and EU entreaties and alarming Israel.[11]

Notwithstanding claims about zero problems then, Turkish behavior in the eastern Mediterranean remains impenitent, bordering on the aggressive, and seemingly indifferent to the consequences it may have for any possible future with the rest of Europe.

## FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS OF THE CAUCASUS

After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the resulting independence of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, Turkey perceived a power vacuum in the region and attempted to expand its presence into areas of former Soviet influence in both the Caucasus and Central Asia.[12] But its current zero problems policy is being tested in a region of past enmities, fractious ethnic interests, lucrative energy resources, and a resurgent Russian presence.

Due to historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan seem to offer the best prospects, despite their religious differences (Sunni and Shiite, respectively). The benefits for Turkey could be substantial due to proximity, trade links and especially Azerbaijan's energy resources. Unfortunately, such relations do not exist in a vacuum, and in its effort to improve relations with other neighbors, Ankara has sometimes acted in a way that threatens its relationship with Baku.

**Turkish behavior in the eastern Mediterranean remains impenitent, bordering on the aggressive.**

Take for example, the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute in which both Turks and Azerbaijanis assert that Armenia is illegally occupying the area. This meeting of minds was set back when Ankara attempted to improve relations with Armenia, leading to Azeri assertions that such contemplated agreements would undermine regional peace and security.[13] Nor did Ankara take into account Azerbaijan's interests when it recognized Kosovo, which had seceded from Serbia. For Azerbaijanis, recognition of such a breakaway republic (similar in this way to Nagorno-Karabakh) was far from reassuring.

In addition, Ankara's on-again off-again relations with Tehran bear on its relationship with Baku. Iran threatens that it will explore for hydrocarbons in parts of the Caspian Sea claimed by Azerbaijan while not allowing the latter to do the same.[14] Concurrently, there is growing restiveness among Azeri-speaking Iranians against perceived suppression of their heritage and language

9 Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, pp. 176-80.

10 *Hurriyet* (Istanbul), Dec. 17, 2010, Jan. 5, 2011.

11 Ibid., Aug. 5, 2011, Sept. 21, 27, 2011.

12 "National Security," *Country Studies*, *Turkey* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Jan. 1995), chap. 5.

13 *BBC News* (London), Oct. 11, 2009; *Today's Zaman* (Istanbul), Dec. 26, 2011.

14 "Azerbaijan," *The World Factbook 2002*, CIA, Mar. 19, 2003.

by the mullahs and even talk of some form of union with Azerbaijan. On these topics, Ankara is apparently silent, leading some Azerbaijanis to wonder about the true intentions of their "friend."

Armenia, of course, presents its own set of problems with the Turks, largely due to the genocide of Turkish Armenians in 1915, which Ankara refuses to recognize. These differences were exacerbated by the struggle over Nagorno-Karabakh; and in 1993, Turkey closed its land border with Armenia in support of Azerbaijan's claims over the territory.[15]

**Notwithstanding Davutoğlu's claims, "zero problems" are only for selected neighbors.**

In 2008-09, there was an effort to improve relations between the governments of Turkey and Armenia centering, in part, on the possibility of Armenian participation in the long-planned Nabucco pipeline project.[16] The two countries drafted the so-called "Zurich protocols," but when Turkey tried to link ratification with its position on the Armenian genocide and Nagorno-Karabakh, the initiative floundered.[17] Relations between the two countries remain problematic; from time to time they worsen, especially when third parties attempt to recognize the Armenian genocide officially as France did in 2001.[18] While Davutoğlu may assert that Turkey "rejects the concept of freezing problems with her neighbors,"[19] relations with Yerevan have barely begun to thaw.

Likewise, while Davutoğlu has claimed that Ankara aims "to solve problems in line with a win-win approach,"[20] its behavior vis-à-vis another Caucasian neighbor, Georgia, belies that assertion. This is largely due to an unspoken recognition that its neo-Ottoman efforts run up against its old nemesis from actual Ottoman days—Russia.

In the immediate post-Cold War period, when Turkey's orientation was still largely pro-Western, Ankara was eager to recognize Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union. In 2011, the two countries signed and ratified a protocol, according to which their citizens could travel in both countries without travel documents. According to the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs, Turkey is Georgia's largest trading partner (with a positive balance in Turkey's favor) and cooperates with it in the field of energy pipelines.[21]

But these good relations are clouded by Ankara's two-faced approach to the questions surrounding the breakaway Russian-backed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.[22] As a NATO member, Ankara feels bound to follow, at least in word, the Western line defending Georgia's territorial integrity. Its actions, however, are more equivocal. Turkish officials have visited Abkhazia while there have been cases where ships, under a Turkish flag, have unsuccessfully tried to break the sea blockade the Georgians have imposed on Abkhazia or to strengthen the latter in any way they can.[23] Likewise, regarding South Ossetia, whose independence only Russia recognizes, Turkey has taken a more moderate stance than that of its Western allies; it tried to broker a distinct compromise of its own,[24] which "got a cold reception in the United States, a close ally of Turkey, where officials complained they had not been informed in advance and criticized the initiative for failing to include Western nations."[25] According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Erdoğan's Caucasus proposal was met with "disbelief in both Georgia and Azerbaijan, since it

15 "Background note: Armenia," U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., Mar. 22, 2012.

16 *Eurasia Insight* (New York), Eurasianet.org, Sept. 29, 2008.

17 *New Caucasus* (Armenia), Jan. 29, 2011.

18 See, *Génocide arménien*, Assemblée Nationale, Paris, Jan. 30, 2001. For Turkish reactions to French actions, see *Today's Zaman*, Jan. 23, 2012, Reuters, Jan. 23, 2012.

19 "Policy of Zero Problems with Our Neighbors," accessed Sept. 21, 2012.

20 Ibid.

21 "Relations between Turkey and Georgia," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Ankara, accessed Sept. 21, 2012.

22 *Today's Zaman*, Apr. 28, 2010.

23 *Georgia Times* (Tbilisi), June 11, 2006.

24 *Today's Zaman*, Aug. 15, 2008.

25 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 5, 2008.

effectively promised to freeze all territorial disputes in the region, including legitimizing Russia's recent territorial grab in Georgia."[26] Finally, Turkey, by using the Montreux Treaty, delayed allowing Western ships to cross the Bosphorus.[27]

This ambivalence has a number of root causes. Abkhazia is home to a small Turkish population over which Ankara may feel protective; at the same time, there are Abkhazians in Turkey who actively promote Abkhaz interests.[28] Further, Turkey's interests in Georgia, regardless of trade ties, are naturally better served with a weakened neighbor to the north.[29] A weakened Georgia is also what Turkey's more northerly neighbor craves; and for all its imperial pretensions, Ankara is not ready or willing to provoke the Russians and will thus follow a policy ranging from appeasement to the freezing of problems. Notwithstanding Davutoğlu's claims, zero problems are only for selected neighbors.


*Despite Davutoğlu's assertions, relations between Ankara and Yerevan have little chance of improvement as long as Turkey continues to deny the Armenian genocide perpetrated in World War I while threatening those who bring up the subject today. Lebanese-Armenians in the disapora demonstrate in Beirut, April 24, 2012.*

## NORTHERN MIDDLE EAST NEIGHBORS

Syria and Iraq, according to Davutoğlu, form both the "northern Middle East" region and the Mesopotamia-Persian Gulf "axis." In his view, Ankara is "obliged to act in these regions not simply as a NATO member but also as a regional power, defending its own national strategies."[30] With such an admission, it is hardly surprising that the policy of zero problems has come up hard against a regional reality that is, to say the least, transitional and turbulent.

Turning first to Syria, it must be acknowledged that there is a long and difficult history between the two nations, revolving around issues of territorial integrity (e.g., Alexandretta),[31] control of water resources (the headwaters of the Tigris and the Euphrates),[32] Ottoman behavior toward its former Arab subjects, and most importantly, the Kurdish problem.

Turkish-Syrian relations began to improve with the signing of the Protocol of Adana on October 20, 1998, under which Syria expelled from its territory Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party—Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan), and his Kurdish rebels. Under

26 *The Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 14, 2009.

27 *Radikal* (Istanbul), Sept. 20, 2008.

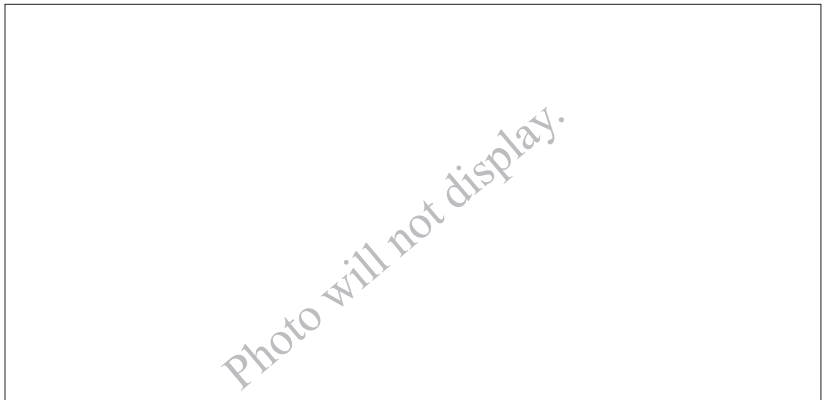
28 See Mitat Çelikpala, "From immigrants to diaspora: Influence of the North Caucasian diaspora in Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 3 (2006): 423-46.

29 Igor Torbakov, "The Georgia Crisis and Russia-Turkey Relations," The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., 2008.

30 Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, pp. 397-405.

31 "Syria," *Country Studies*, *Turkey* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Jan. 1995).

32 *CNN World*, Sept. 3, 2009.




*Once close allies, Syria's Bashar al-Assad (left) and Turkey's Erdoğan have had a major falling-out over the Syrian regime's slaughter of its own citizens during the ongoing civil war. Whether the decision is due to neo-Ottoman pretensions or a covert desire to install an Islamist regime in Damascus, Turkey has emphatically jettisoned its "zero problems" policy with its southern neighbor.*

Erdoğan, these relations continued to improve with mutual visits at the highest level,[33] Turkish support for Syria during the 2005 Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, and a 2007 memorandum of understanding between the two countries creating conditions for cooperation in the fields of politics, security, economics,[34] energy, and water resources.[35] In 2009, the two countries met, along with Iraqi representatives, to resolve issues related to control of the Tigris and Euphrates water resources.[36] Turkish-Syrian relations were further strengthened after Ankara's condemnation of Israel's incursion into Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009[37] and formalized in early 2011 when the Turks signed an agreement to train Syrian armed forces (simultaneously raising questions within NATO.)[38]

With the emergence of serious domestic opposition to the Assad dynasty in 2011, Turkish leaders sensed an opportunity for increasing the country's influence and dramatically changed their behavior toward Damascus. After an initial delay, Ankara froze relations with Syria, began to criticize the regime, and lobbied for greater participation by Sunni Muslims in Bashar al-Assad's government, and when that failed, raised the banner of democratization and human rights, pressuring Assad to step down.[39]

At present Ankara is pursuing multiple goals in Syria, some of which are mutually exclusive. It seeks first and foremost to overthrow Assad and to help accomplish this, obtain the assistance of Masoud Barzani, the Iraqi Kurd leader, as well as incite the sizable Kurdish population in Syria to join the opposition against Assad. This must not, in Ankara's eyes, evolve into the creation of a separate Kurdish enclave should Syria disintegrate, thereby igniting the aspirations of its own restive and autonomy-seeking Kurdish population. Turkey also seeks to limit the influence of Iran and Russia in the Syrian crisis, a task made all the more difficult by Moscow's clear stake in keeping the Assad regime in power: Syria is an important purchaser of Russian equipment, and Tartus is the only naval facility open to Russia in the Mediterranean. For its part, Iran's only state alliance in the region has long been Syria, which has also served as a transit point for arming Tehran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah.[40]

33 See, for example, "Latest Developments," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Ankara, Sept. 21, 2012.

34 "Syria Economic and Trade Relations," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Ankara, accessed Sept. 21, 2012.

35 *CNN World*, Sept. 3, 2009.

36 Ibid., Sept. 3, 2009.

37 Ibid., Dec. 14, 2010.

38 *CNSnews* (Alexandria, Va.), Feb. 11, 2011.

39 *BBC News*, Nov. 30, 2011.

Like Syrian relations, Turkish-Iraqi relations are colored by a past history of Ottoman rule as well as the Sunni-Shiite divide. Although Ankara antagonized both its NATO allies and Iraq's nascent post-Saddam regime by denying use of its territory for the 2003 coalition invasion, it has over the past five years made efforts to promote its interests in Iraq though these efforts have hardly fostered zero problems.

One of Ankara's highest priorities has been to exclude the PKK from operating in Iraq.[41] At the same time, it seeks, for various reasons, to improve relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. Most importantly, it wants to play a major role in the transfer of the landlocked oil deposits from northern Iraq to the West via either Kirkuk-Ceyhan or Nabucco pipelines.[42] As such, it signed an agreement in May 2012 with the Kurdish Barzani government to build a new pipeline for transporting crude oil.[43] In doing so, Turkey has adopted a tactic of momentarily forgetting its opposition to an independent Kurdistan but without abandoning previous declared positions[44] or practices of military intervention[45] when it so chooses.

While Turkey has officially declared its support for the territorial integrity and national unity of Iraq, its actions have contributed to the forces that threaten to tear the country apart. Much of this instability has its origins in Shiite-Sunni antagonism: Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki, a Shiite, is considered too close to Iran while Iraqi vice president Tareq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, is close to Turkey, the Arab countries, and the Regional Government of Kurdistan.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops in December 2011 has increased centrifugal forces in Iraq.[46] When a governmental crisis erupted around an arrest warrant issued for Hashemi, Ankara quickly reacted, siding with the Sunnis and criticizing the policies of the prime minister. Maliki's reaction was unusually strong by diplomatic standards, excoriating the Turks for interference in the internal affairs of his country "as if Iraq is controlled or run by them."[47] Having fled to Turkey, Hashemi was sentenced to death by an Iraqi court.[48] Erdoğan gave his full support to the exiled leader, declaring, despite Interpol's "red notice," that Turkey would host Hashemi for "as long as he wants," and that it "will not hand him over" to Iraqi authorities.[49]

**Turkish actions have contributed to the forces that threaten to tear Iraq apart.**

Further, Ankara sought to obtain a non-Kurdish status for the oil-rich Kirkuk area in northern Iraq after the fall of Saddam and supported its "cousin" Turkmens in their claims to the area, thus creating a tool of leverage within Iraq against the Kurds and the Iraqi government.

In sum, Ankara seeks its own interests in Syria and Iraq, which, while often contradictory, are clearly independent of the interests of both states. Whether supporting an insurgency in Syria or encouraging the Kurds of northern Iraq, Turkey's behavior cannot be characterized as that of a good neighbor. And while Ankara may reap some short term gains, notably the transfer of Iraqi Kurdish oil through its territory, it also risks losing its land access to the Arabian Peninsula by angering Baghdad. It remains to be seen whether all these Turkish actions will bear long-term fruit.

## TURKISH-IRANIAN RIVALRY

Iran has been a Turkish rival in some form or another at least since the days of the old Ottoman and Safavid empires, and the AKP-Erdoğan

40 *Today's Zaman*, Dec. 18, 2011; United Press International (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 12, 2012.

41 "Latest Developments," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Ankara, Dec. 15, 2011.

42 United Press International, Dec. 22, 2011.

43 *Southeast European Times Türkiye* (U.S. European Command), June 21, 2012.

44 *Today's Zaman*, Aug. 10, 2012.

45 *CNN News*, Dec. 30, 2011.

46 *BBC News*, Dec. 22, 2011.

47 *Today's Zaman*, Jan. 14, 2012.

48 *BBC News*, Sept, 10, 2012.

49 *Today's Zaman,* May 8, 2012; Reuters, Sept. 11, 2012.

government has vacillated between drawing closer to Tehran and confronting it over various issues. Some analysts consider Ankara's outreach to Tehran as being purely economic in origin. Certainly trade with Iran has increased significantly from $1 billion at the beginning of the decade to $10 billion in 2009, to $16 billion in 2011.[50] It is Iran, however, that mostly benefits from these trade relations[51] while simultaneously using its Turkish connection to break out of its international isolation.[52]

**Erdoğan seems happy to oblige the ayatollahs and has repeatedly acted as an apologist for Iranian behavior.**

Erdoğan seems happy to oblige the ayatollahs and has repeatedly acted as an apologist for Iranian behavior.[53] His congratulations to Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his fraudulent reelection in 2009 outraged many in the West. He has argued that Tehran is unjustly accused by outsiders and has characterized discussions regarding the Iranian nuclear weapons program as "gossip," deriding any potential military operation against it as "crazy."[54] While serving as a non-permanent Security Council member, Ankara voted against U.N. Security Council resolution 1929 of June 2010, which imposed serious sanctions on Tehran in various spheres. In opposition to the wishes of its NATO partners, Turkey joined in a trilateral meeting with Iran and Brazil, the upshot of which was an agreement for Iran to send 1200 kilograms of uranium for enrichment to Turkey and receive, in exchange, nuclear fuel for its reactor.[55] To Ankara's deep embarrassment, Iran almost immediately reneged on the agreement, vowing to continue its efforts to enrich uranium.[56]

Ankara has further distanced itself from its NATO allies by embracing Tehran's positions regarding a proposed missile shield to be installed on Turkish soil to safeguard against Iranian threats. When it failed to convince its partners not to install the antimissile shield, Turkey worked to ensure that Iran would not be named its target and has assured the Iranians that no non-NATO country (i.e., Israel) would have access to the radar's data.[57]

True, there are areas of disagreement between Ankara and Tehran. The Turks would like to see better conditions for their Iranian Azeri "cousins" while the Iranians want Turkey to stay out of its internal affairs and to keep neighboring Azerbaijan from inflaming this issue.[58] While both states reject an independent Kurdistan, neither is above playing the Kurdish card with each other's minority group.[59] And the two governments have starkly divergent positions vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war where Turkey has thrown its support behind the rebels while Tehran sends arms and soldiers to bolster the Assad regime.[60] Is this behavior a successful example of zero problems? For all its bluster, Ankara's choices may merely reflect recognition that Tehran has dangerous military capabilities that must be blunted.

## TURKEY AND ISRAEL

Significantly, Turkish policies toward Iran are also potentially damaging Ankara's standing with the West and its closer neighbor and former ally—Israel. Turkish overtures to Iran have often come at the expense of Israel, which has borne the brunt of Ankara's revived imperial ambitions, coupled with an Islamist disdain for the Jewish state.

Until the rise of the AKP, relations between Ankara and Jerusalem had ranged from good to

50 *AEI Irantracker*, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., June 24, 2010; *CNN World*, Sept. 7, 2011; *Tehran Times*, Mar. 28, 2012.

51 *Today's Zaman,* Jan. 25, 2012.

52 *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., Mar. 3, 2009.

53 *CNSnews*, Feb. 11, 2011.

54 *BBC News*, Oct. 26, 2009.

55 Ibid., May 17, 2010.

56 *CNN World*, May 17, 2010.

57 *Today's Zaman*, Mar. 30. 2012.

58 "Iran," *Country Studies*, *Turkey* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Jan. 1995).

59 Ibid.

60 *The Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 27, 2012.

excellent. Not only did the two countries not compete, but during the Cold War, they benefited from U.S. as well as British foreign policy imperatives. In the post-Cold War era, as two regional Western strongholds in a turbulent area, the governments cooperated on addressing common risks such as terrorism, strengthening their relationship in all areas.

Under Erdoğan, this has changed dramatically. By way of reasserting its leading regional role and winning over the Arab world, Ankara has progressively distanced itself from Israel and the West. In 2004, Erdoğan accused Israel of practicing "state terrorism;"[61] in 2006, his wife publicly endorsed the *Valley of the Wolves*, an anti-American and anti-Semitic movie; also in 2006, instead of inviting extremists to renounce violence, Erdoğan personally received Hamas leader Khaled Mashal after the militant Islamist group won the Palestinian elections.[62]

Matters worsened in late 2008 and early 2009 when Israel, reacting to years of rocket and missile attacks against its southern citizens, launched Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. In January, Erdoğan publicly railed against longtime dove and Israeli president Shimon Peres at an international conference in Davos, Switzerland. In April, Turkey conducted joint military exercises with Syria, and in October, excluded Israel from the "Anatolian Eagle" military exercise,[63] in which the latter had participated in every year since 2001.

Turkish hostility to Israel reached its zenith on May 31, 2010, when the *Mavi Marmara* boat, under Turkish flag, attempted to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza under the pretence of transferring aid to the Palestinians. According to Turkish press reports, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was in contact with the organizers of the operation despite claims to the contrary.[64] When Israeli troops boarding the ship were met with violence, which resulted in the death of nine people,[65] Ankara downgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel and cancelled all military cooperation with Jerusalem.[66] Despite Israeli offers of compensation for the victims' families,[67] Turkey continues to spurn any efforts at reconciliation. Most recently, it announced the intention to sell uncensored images of Israel when it launches the GokTurk satellite, something that could damage Israeli security interests[68] and has threatened Israeli and Cypriot energy explorations in the eastern Mediterranean.

**To woo the Arabs, Turkey has initiated a cold war with the Jewish state.**

While Israel may not border Turkey directly, it is the only true democracy in the region and a country with which Turkey not only had zero problems for decades but also the closest of relations. In an effort to woo the neighboring Arabs by being seen as a champion of the Palestinians and, to some degree, of Islam, Turkey has initiated a cold war with the Jewish state. At the same time, it seems that Iran has earned more from Ankara's policy of rapprochement while Israel accumulates the costs.

## CONCLUSION

Thanks to continuous Western support, the end of the Cold War found Turkey stronger, both militarily and economically, and with a power vacuum to its immediate east. Within this context, the AKP's foreign policy decisions demonstrate the insincerity of its "zero problems with neighbors" claims. Rather than solve problems, Ankara is, at best, freezing them, in the hope of building better commercial relations to satisfy its growth needs. In many instances, it is worsening them at its neighbors' expense.

The Turkish government's insincerity mani-

61 *BBC News*, June 3, 2004.
62 *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), Feb. 23-Mar. 1, 2006.
63 *BBC News*, Oct. 11, 2009.
64 *Milliyet* (Istanbul), June 5, 2010.
65 *The New York Times*, May 31, 2010.
66 *CNN World*, Sept. 6, 2011.
67 *The Guardian* (London), May 24, 2012.
68 *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), Mar. 10, 2011.

fests itself in an attempt to mask its expansionist ambitions and an attitude that can be described as "what applies to others does not apply to me." Thus, Erdoğan accuses foreign leaders of "killing children"[69] while fighting against the recognition of past genocides (Armenians, Greeks of Pontus, and Assyrians). It exploits the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla incident in which nine Turks were killed while downplaying its far more numerous killings of Kurdish civilians in Iraqi territory. It accuses Israel of occupying Palestinian territories while illegally occupying northern Cyprus, claims the right to invade Iraq with impunity, and frequently violates its neighbors' airspace.[70] It accuses others of terrorism while facilitating the transfer of weapons to terror organizations.[71] It participates in and benefits from NATO while obstructing the organization's policies as in the case of Iraq in 2003, Lebanon in 2005, Georgia in 2007, and Iran.

**The Turkish "zero problems" policy failed because it was a tool for neo-Ottoman ambitions.**

Initial improvements with the Arab world have stalled. Despite statements to the contrary from its minister of economics,[72] Turkey has lost the Syrian market. It risks losing access to the energy resources of the Arabian Peninsula through Iraqi or Syrian pipelines and is desperately trying to replace this route with shipping routes from Mersin to Port Said, Egypt.[73] Due to its policies toward its Western-oriented neighbors—Greece, Cyprus, Armenia, and Israel—the AKP has also undermined Ankara's relations with the West, particularly those nations who were contemplating its joining the EU.[74]

The policy of zero problems appears to be operative with only two states: Iran and Russia. In contrast to their behavior toward Greece, Cyprus, Syria, and Iraq, which have at various times either been threatened with violence or have been attacked, the Turks remain conspicuously silent toward Armenia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia where Russian armed forces are present. Similarly, Ankara behaves toward Iran as if it were not a member of NATO, excusing Tehran's nuclear program and delaying the installation of a NATO missile shield system. Since both Russia and Iran are stronger than Turkey, Ankara seems, for the most part, to be doing its utmost to avoid upsetting their regional interests, but this has nothing to do with neighborly solicitude.

The zero problems policy has not failed, as has been suggested, because it was tested against authoritarian governments:[75] Greece, Cyprus, Armenia, and Israel are hardly governed by dictators, and Iraq, for all its failings, has not descended to this level. The policy has failed because it was a tool for neo-Ottoman ambitions and global aspirations that have now become all too obvious.[76]

The unvarnished truth is that Ankara acts, to use Davutoğlu's metaphor, like a heavyweight wrestler seeking to intimidate its middleweight neighbors. As such, "zero problems with neighbors" may turn into the country's zero hour as Ankara finds itself increasingly considered an unreliable partner by its allies and a regional bully by its neighbors.

69 *CNN World*, June 6, 2011.

70 *The Guardian*, Dec. 29, 2011; *The Sofia Echo*, Aug. 19, 2009.

71 See, for example, Voice of America, Aug. 24, 2012; *Hurriyet*, Sept. 18, 2012; *The Guardian*, Sept. 27, 2012 .

72 Reuters, Dec. 7, 2011.

73 *Today's Zaman*, June 4, 2012.

74 *O Filelefitheros* (Cyprus), Jan. 11, Dec. 9, 2011; *Hurriyet,* Sept. 28, 2011.

75 Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill," *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2012, pp. 41-50.

76 Piotr Zalewski, "The Self-Appointed Superpower: Turkey Goes It Alone," *World Policy Journal*, Dec. 2010, 27, pp. 97-102.