



## PROBLEMS FACING THE TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

*Marius Calligaris*

A centrepiece of the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) foreign policy was the so-called zero-problems policy and an active neighbourhood policy. Currently, several problems can be identified. In Syria, Ankara is absolutely on the side of Assad's opponents. In its relations with Iraq and Iran there are various negative factors. The contacts to Cairo have been severely disrupted since the Egyptian revolution. Also no improvements seem to have been made in its icy relations with Israel. There is dissent with the U.S. regarding the Middle East. Only the relations with Russia have not suffered new setbacks.

After 2002 a centrepiece of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Justice and Development Party or JDP – government was the so-called zero-problems policy. Due to its active neighbourhood policy, Turkey succeeded in converting its previously problematic ties with almost all neighbours into good relations. Exceptions to this are Armenia and Cyprus. The contacts to the Middle-East countries, in particular, have been significantly intensified.

The stronger regional commitment and the zero-problems policy met with international approval, especially in the Arab World. Turkey's weight and prestige as a regional and international actor with, in principle, positive objectives increased significantly.

In the following, the problems of the Turkish neighbourhood policy are to be presented using the example of selected states. Taking

stock today is rather disillusioning. Only little remains of the zero-problems policy.

### Syria – from Partners to Opponents

The relationship between Turkey and Syria was clearly accentuated after the JDP assumed power. This manifested itself in numerous high-level visits, the installation of a Strategic Cooperation Council and an increase in economic contacts. The armed forces of both countries conducted joint manoeuvres and Damascus de facto recognised that the province of Hatay (separated from Syria in 1939) belongs to Turkey.

When turmoil broke out in Syria in 2011, Prime Minister Erdogan repeatedly advised Assad to implement reforms. Turkey was clearly interested in preventing Assad's downfall, but made it clear that it called for democratisation measures and that its

support was not unconditional. When all the advice given did not yield any results, Turkey turned into a fierce opponent of the Syrian leadership, given its bloody repression of the civilian population.

Turkey obviously had expected to be able to make Assad implement some reforms. It may well also have expected a quick victory of the insurgents, which eventually proved to be a miscalculation. Ankara allowed the political and the military resistance to form on Turkish ground.

Incidents, such as the downing of a Turkish military aircraft by Syrian air defence in June 2012, a bomb attack apparently organised by the Syrian secret service in the Turkish border town of Reyhanli in May 2013 (which resulted in 51 deaths), as well as the downing of a Syrian helicopter after it had entered Turkish airspace in September 2013, led to a complete breakdown in relations. Moreover, the government denies reports of arms deliveries to rebels through Turkish territory, allegedly to the Al Nusra Brigades, which were met with harsh criticism on part of the United States, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

### Iraq – Strained Relations

After the end of the war in 2003, Turkey was mainly interested in maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity.

The relationship with the Al Maliki government was difficult at first. Over time, however, Bagdad realised that Ankara might be able to contribute to stability in Iraq. This brought about an increase in economic contacts and mutual visits. A Strategic Cooperation Council on the ministerial level was installed. In the last years, however, the relations dropped to a low since Prime Minister Al Maliki repeatedly accused Turkey of meddling in internal affairs and of supporting the Sunnis in their power struggle against the Shias.

What made contacts worse was the fact that Ankara refuses to extradite former Vice President Tareq Al Hashemi to Bagdad, who had fled to Turkey in 2011 in order to avoid arrest. Iraqi authorities accuse him of conspiracy to murder Al Maliki and of terrorist activities, accusations that on the part of Turkey are regarded as purely politically motivated.

Another cause of discord is the cooperation in the energy sector between Ankara and the Kurdish regional government in Northern Iraq - with which Turkey now maintains good relations for economic reasons - while completely bypassing the central government in Bagdad. The Iraqi government has repeatedly criticised these contacts and referred to them as illegal. The USA also repeatedly spoke out against these direct relations.

### Iran – a Difficult Neighbour

While the relations between Ankara and Tehran developed in waves before the JDP assumed power, afterwards clear progress was made. Turkey started seeing Iran no longer as an external threat and as a source of danger of Islamist activities. There was an increase in mutual visits and the economic relations intensified massively. Iran is for Turkey the second most important provider of natural gas and also a source of crude oil. On the issue of the Iranian nuclear programme, Ankara tried to mediate between Tehran and the West, always refusing punitive measures against Tehran. Turkey only assented to NATO's planned anti-missile shield on condition that Iran was not named as a potential launch-country of enemy missiles.

Nevertheless, the installation of parts of the missile defence shield in 2012 notably strained the relations between Ankara and Tehran. Already in November 2011, Iran had threatened that it might not rule out an attack on its neighbour country if the

defensive system were installed. The issue continues to strain the relationship.

Also the stance on the civil war in Syria is diametrically opposed. While Turkey perceives its role as being in the frontline against Assad, Iran supports the regime in Damascus politically, economically and militarily.

How far the formerly sometimes problematic - but all in all good - relations will be resumed under President Rohani remains to be seen.

### **Egypt – the Overthrow in Cairo Preliminarily Ends the Good Relations**

Already before the JDP had assumed power, Turkey maintained a good and solid relationship with Syria. After 2002 the intensity of the contacts actually increased.

After civil unrest broke out in 2011, Erdogan very soon appealed to Mubarak to resign. After the toppling of Mubarak, Ankara called for free and fair elections and the withdrawal of the military as soon as a democratic system had been installed. President Gül was the first head of state that visited Egypt following the overthrow and also pointed out the necessity of reforms.

The victory of the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies in the parliamentary elections and the election of Mohamed Mursi as president added a new dimension to the relationship, since a leadership that was ideologically close to the JDP assumed power in Cairo. Consequently, Turkey granted generous financial aid to Egypt.

Turkey strongly condemned the removal from power of President Mursi and the bloody crushing of his supporters' demonstrations. Erdogan referred to this as state terrorism and said that Saudi Arabia was an ally in the coup, which in turn severely strained the relations between Ankara and Riyadh. He criticised the Western states for

not rating the transition of power as a coup and, moreover, referred to the overthrow as an Israeli plot. This provoked negative reactions in Israel, the USA and other Western states.

This uncompromising attitude has severely strained the current relations to Egypt, and Ankara has adopted a collision course with the most populous Arab state. Turkey was the only country to commit itself in such a way. It stands alone in its harsh criticism, as the USA and the EU were markedly more restrained.

After the military coup the new regime already took first measures against Ankara. Recently, however, there have been signs of a slight easing of tensions.

### **Israel – the Relationship Has not Really Been Mended**

No sustainable improvement can be noticed in the relations between Turkey and Israel. The formerly good relationship has been severely disrupted by the Gaza campaign of 2008/2009, repeated verbal attacks by Erdogan against Israel, and an Israeli military raid on the ship Mavi Marmara in 2009, which was to transport relief supplies to Gaza. Israel was not willing to yield to the Turkish preconditions for improving their relationship, namely an apology on the part of Israel for the attack, compensation to the surviving dependents of the victims, and the termination of the Gaza blockade. In April 2013, Prime Minister Netanyahu eventually did apologise – thanks to US mediation. Negotiations regarding the payment of compensation were initiated, but obviously have not yielded any results so far. A new strain was the Turkish claim mentioned above that Israel had orchestrated the overthrow in Cairo. The situation has not normalised up to now and there is the impression that Erdogan does not really aim at a normalisation, probably due to the upcoming local and presidential elections in 2014.

## Deductions and Findings

• Currently Ankara is far from enjoying the desired smooth relations with its neighbouring countries. However, it should be noted that Turkey has not ended up in the current situation solely because of its own fault, but also due to developments in its neighbour states.

• In line with the doctrine of Foreign Minister Davutoglu, zero problems means taking no position in regional conflicts, and non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states. In contrast to this thesis, Ankara has become a party to conflicts due to its attitude in the Syrian civil war and its position regarding the coup in Egypt. By way of its unilateral policies Turkey has lost or given up the role it had been aiming for as a mediator between conflicting parties. In the Middle East, Ankara's role has diminished when compared with that at the beginning of the upheavals in the Arab region.

• Numerous commentators believe that Erdogan, by way of his increasingly religious and bombastic rhetoric - which he uses time and again to challenge internationally relevant actors, such as the US and the EU - has counteracted the efficiency of the Turkish foreign policy. Moreover, Turkey is criticised for having sided with the wrong party in Egypt and, therefore having destroyed the relationship to the new regime in Cairo. Erdogan is reproached for being often guided more by religious and party-political preferences, rather than by the national interests of the country.

• Erdogan's harsh criticism of the Gulf States, saying that they had supported the overthrow of Mursi, has resulted in a tarnished relationship with these countries. In this way, economic drawbacks have to be expected.

• Ibrahim Kalin, the foreign-political advisor of Erdogan, has rejected the accusation

that the JDP government's policies have led Turkey into isolation in the Middle East. He spoke about a precious loneliness, possibly alluding to Great Britain's splendid isolation. Turkey, he says, accepts this in view of it representing higher moral values and it remaining true to its principles. This creates the impression that the setbacks suffered in foreign policy are to be converted into a positive doctrine. Invoking this precious loneliness partly means a return to the mindset of Kemalist-type conspiracy theories. This is exemplified very well by the unrest related to the Gezi Park, which, as Erdogan explained, was controlled from abroad.

• The picture is rounded off by the still unresolved relationship to Armenia, the unsettled issue of Cyprus (where the cause is to be found rather on the part of Nicosia), and EU criticism of Erdogan's position regarding the Gezi Park. The relations to Azerbaijan, Georgia and the states of the Western Balkans, however, have remained unaffected. According to experts, also the relations to Russia are hardly strained despite the diametrically opposed positions regarding Syria.

• Summary: The ambitious concept of the JDP government concerning the neighbour countries and the Middle East is currently marked by clear setbacks. Therefore, it remains to be seen how this will affect Turkey's future importance in the region.

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