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## Opinion: Turkey needs to rethink its regional policy

Posted By [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#) On September 21, 2013 @ 8:05 am In [Opinion](#) | [No Comments](#)

Turkey, a regional powerhouse with a grand history and civilization, plays a crucial role in the stability and security of the Middle East and Central Asia. Under the leadership of Turkey's Prime Minister Erdoğan, in the past decade the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has steered the country toward socioeconomic and political stability. During this time, economic growth has averaged 7.5 percent annually, inflation has fallen to record levels, per capita income increased from USD 2,800 in 2001 to current levels of around USD 10,000, and the tourism industry has flourished, rising from 12 million visitors to over 31 million today. Turkey's regional politics also shifted drastically—ending a century-old policy of alienation from the Middle East. The Erdoğan's government instead introduced a "Zero Problems with Neighbors Policy" with its neighbors to bring about peace both domestically and regionally. The "Arab Awakening," however, has tested this policy, and with the latest developments there are indications that Ankara has failed as a reliable partner to its allies and regional neighbors.

Ankara has lent full support to the anti-regime terrorist rebels in the Syrian conflict and even permitted them to use Turkish soil. Turkey has even jeopardized its close relationship with Washington by voicing dissatisfaction with the US branding Jabhat Al-Nusra a terrorist group and an Al-Qaeda sympathizer. Turkey's support for the Al-Qaeda-led Syrian uprising has also taken a toll on its relationship with Iraq. Al-Qaeda is behind major violence and terrorism throughout the region, specifically in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, making it the major national security threat to the stability and security of both Iraq and Syria. Practically, Ankara has contributed toward terrorist forces aspiring to tear Iraq apart. The Kurdish issue, a traditional security dilemma for both Iraq and Turkey, has risen once again to the forefront. With deteriorating Iraqi-Turkish relations, Ankara has forged closer ties with Iraqi Kurds, raising the ire of Baghdad. The Turkish and Iraqis were previously cooperating on the Kurdish issue, but the change in Ankara's position will further heighten bilateral tensions, with increased instability on multiple fronts. Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict and its forging closer relations with Iraqi Kurds are seen by Baghdad and Damascus as signs of interference in their domestic affairs and will only lead to further mistrust and animosity.

Turkey's relations with Egypt have also reached an all-time low in the months since the Egyptian military took power by overthrowing Mursi's government. Mursi was strongly supported by Ankara and the Muslim Brotherhood. A sobering sign was the cancellation of planned naval exercises scheduled for October 2013 and recalling their respective ambassadors. Prime Minister Erdoğan condemned what he called the "massacre" of peaceful protesters in Egypt and characterized the military takeover as a "coup"—words that infuriated the interim government in Cairo. Such comments led to Cairo recalling its ambassador in protest against Turkey's "clear interference" in Egypt's domestic affairs.

Turkey's position on Syria has also strained its vital relations with Iran. Turkey's bilateral trade with Iran has increased significantly, from USD 1 billion in 2001 to USD 16 billion in 2011. The close ties with Iran had previously enabled Ankara to play a prominent role in resolving the disputed Iranian nuclear file with the West. Erdoğan and with Lula da Silva of Brazil were able to secure Tehran's signature in the trilateral nuclear deal aimed at ending the nuclear quagmire. The Syrian conflict, however, has highlighted the two governments' opposing positions: Turkey has fully backed the rebels to bring regime change in Syria and Iran has intensified its efforts to bolster the Assad government. The Syrian conflict has revived Iranian-Turkish regional rivalry, which has a history dating back centuries, from the days of the Ottoman and Safavid empires.

Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and majority of Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf soured once they refused to back Egyptian president Mohamed Mursi. Turkey's deputy prime minister, Bekir Bozdağ, claimed that "it is clear that there are monarchic structures disturbed by the change in Egypt around the axis of democracy, human rights and people's will. One must be blind not to see it. It is that clear." Turkey and Saudi Arabia may be in tune when it comes to bringing about regime change in Syria, but they clearly differ on Egypt. "Whether Bashar [Al-Assad] or [Egyptian army chief Abdel Fattah El-Sisi], there is no difference between them. . . . I am saying that state terrorism is currently underway in Egypt," is how Erdoğan described the recent developments in Egypt.

Erdoğan, referring to a 2011 video of former Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni and French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy discussing the Arab Spring, accused Israel of orchestrating a coup in Cairo. The White House was quick to criticize Erdoğan's statement: "We strongly condemn the statements that were made by Prime Minister Erdoğan today. Suggesting that Israel is somehow responsible for recent events in Egypt is offensive, unsubstantiated, and wrong," White House spokesman Josh Earnest said in a briefing to reporters. Former Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman replied that "everyone who hears [Erdoğan's] hateful words and incitement understands beyond a doubt that he follows in the footsteps of Goebbels." An Egyptian government spokesman slammed Erdoğan as a "Western agent."

Turkey's "zero conflict" policy with its neighbors has failed, and Ankara is on the verge of full conflict with the region. Relations have deteriorated with Iran, Russia, Sudan, Syria, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Authority, Armenia, Cyprus, Hezbollah and Lebanon. Moreover, through to its policies toward Greece, Cyprus, Armenia and Israel, Ankara has also undermined its relations with the West. In an effort to avert a new war in the Middle East, President Barack Obama welcomed the deal reached with Russia on Syria's chemical weapons. Ankara, going against the grain, expressed skepticism and criticized the initiative. This move highlights the degree to which Ankara has deviated from playing a constructive role in managing regional crises through peaceful means.

The Middle East is on fire and the constructive role of Turkey is essential. Ankara should try to revive the Zero Problems Policy with its neighbors. To achieve this urgent objective, Ankara should consider the following:

- 1) Turkey should not throw all its weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood based on the wrong assumption that the future of the region rests with this party.
- 2) The Arab Awakening should not lead Turkey to abandon its policy of non-interference.
- 3) Turkey should maintain a position of neutrality, enabling Ankara to play a credible role in regional crisis management.
- 4) It must determine which direction its foreign policy is heading. Iranian foreign policy following the 1979 revolution was based on ideology and national interest. Turkey, as a secular state, is essentially acting more ideologically than Iran on its foreign policy.
- 5) Turkey should not harbor ambitions of reviving the Ottoman past, as it would have grave consequences for Turkey and the region. Turkey's recent policies have made some countries think Ankara is after reviving the former Ottoman hegemony in the region, believing that the "zero problems policy" was just a cover for Ankara's "neo-Ottoman" ambitions.
- 6) The country should not forget its internal challenges. Turkey's credibility in the region and the world took a beating this summer with Erdoğan's decision to put down the demonstrations with riot police, tear gas and water cannons leading to the arrest and injury of hundreds of demonstrators in about 50 cities.
- 7) Turkey should attempt to cooperate with regional powers, mainly Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Egypt, to manage the crisis arising from the Arab Awakening. Such a policy should be based on non-interference, mutual respect and peaceful settlement.



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