As Turks debate whether the AKP is Islamizing Turkish society to an unacceptable degree, they also argue over whether the party has deviated from the republic’s traditional foreign policy orientation. From the 1950s until the end of the Cold War, Turkey took pride in serving as a key Euro-Atlantic ally that secured NATO’s southern flank against Soviet expansion, while striving for full membership in the European Union. Many observers now believe Turkish foreign policy has shifted to a new “axis”—focused eastward and perhaps derivative of an Islamist agenda.¹ Current Turkish foreign policy, the AKP’s domestic opponents argue, contradicts fundamental tenets laid down by Atatürk. Some Euro-Atlantic allies accuse Turkey of departing from years of shared approaches to Iran, Israel, and the broader Middle East; and they worry that Turkey is becoming “too Islamic” to be accepted as a full member of the EU.
The AKP rejects accusations that it has shifted Turkey’s foreign policy axis. AKP leaders argue that changing international conditions allow Turkey to assert its leadership in its region and beyond, based on a proud historical legacy. In principle, the argument continues, Turkey’s foreign policy remains consistent with Atatürk’s core tenet of “peace at home, peace in the world”; what is new are additional elements based on fresh opportunities that arose with the end of the Cold War but do not contradict the fundamental values and interests of the Euro-Atlantic community. AKP leaders observe that the United States and other NATO allies look to Turkey as a key partner in resolving a broadening range of problems in Turkey’s geo-strategic space.

In practice, it is evident that under the AKP, Turkish policies have changed with regard to several key issues on which Ankara and its Euro-Atlantic allies previously were aligned. What is less clear is whether such tactical changes reflect a fundamental strategic shift. Answering that question requires an exploration of the evolution of Turkish foreign policy since the founding of the republic in 1923.

Atatürk’s Foreign Policy: Peace and the West

Mustafa Kemal’s vision of how to interact with the rest of the world responded to the precarious security situation of the Turkish Republic at its birth. The European powers that had won the Great War in 1919 were eager to dismantle the Otto-
man Empire and to bring its sprawling domains into their own spheres of influence. Against all odds, by 1923, the Turkish army Atatürk commanded had defeated the alliance of European powers and warded off their threat to the Turkish homeland.

Atatürk realized that to survive Turkey needed stability within its borders and in its geographical region. That led directly to his core concept of “peace at home, peace in the world.” Atatürk’s quest for domestic and regional peace generated a status quo mindset in foreign policy. Seeking to avoid risky conflicts that could undermine the nascent state he was trying to build, he sought to avoid any military undertaking that was not required to defend Turkey’s most vital interests. He counseled in particular against engagement in the conflict-prone Middle East, where European powers were establishing their own competing spheres of influence.

Moreover, Atatürk instinctively looked beyond Turkey’s borders. He saw the Middle East as having fallen behind the West in terms of technology and general development. He viewed Islam in the Middle East as frozen in time, dominated by suspicion of the West and equal rights for women, and emphasizing the authority of Muslim clerics over individual rights and rational thinking. Atatürk sought to insulate Turkey from what he viewed as a Middle Eastern mindset of stagnation and to propel the republic toward modernization. His foreign policy thus focused on moving a proud Turkey closer to Europe, in keeping with 14 centuries of Turkic migration from East to West.
From Atatürk to the AKP

After Atatürk’s death, his successors followed his admonition to avoid conflict with countries that could threaten the nascent Turkish Republic. Although Turkey stayed out of World War II, the end of that global conflict brought a new danger, which compelled the country to break out of isolationism and seek new allies. During the war, an expansionist Soviet Union, on Turkey’s eastern border, took over former Ottoman territories in the Balkans. Ankara was alarmed by the possibility of Moscow attempting to satisfy its longstanding quest for an outlet to the Mediterranean and control of the Turkish Straits. Seeking partners to contain Soviet expansion, Turkey joined the UN coalition led by the United States to counter Moscow’s ambitions on the Korean peninsula. Korea was worlds away, but Turkey’s leaders saw their involvement in that conflict as the price necessary for inclusion in the Pax Americana. As Ankara deepened its military cooperation with Washington, the leader of the Euro-Atlantic community, it grew comfortable with NATO and joined that alliance in 1952. For the following four decades, Turkey secured NATO’s southern flank against the Soviet Union, while pursuing peace at home and peace in the world through collaboration with its new Euro-Atlantic allies.

NATO membership created the strategic opening for Turkey to seek closer relations with the European Community. In 1959, Ankara requested an association agreement with the EC. Delayed by a military coup, Turkey finally concluded the pact, known as the Ankara Agreement, in 1963. That develop-
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ment launched an extended period of Turkey’s adaptation toward EC norms, after which Turkey would apply for EC membership. At first, Turkey remained hesitant to surrender its sovereignty to a multilateral organization. (Ankara’s efforts to adapt its norms to EC standards came to a full stop after the 1980 military coup.)

Ankara eventually applied for EC membership in 1987. Still, most Turks retained a strong nationalist pride and a skeptical view of reform “demands”; they were viewed as dictates of EC bureaucrats, even if all realists understood that Turkey would have to play by European rules if it joined this exclusive European club.

Part of the resistance to EC-mandated change stemmed from their traumatic experience with Europe during the long twilight of the Ottoman Empire. Turks still smarted at European powers referring to the Ottoman Empire as “the sick man of Europe” during the late nineteenth century and humiliating Turkey with the Treaty of Sévres in 1920. Moreover, Turks viewed Europeans as insensitive and naïve for failing to appreciate the strategic significance of their republic as the only secular democracy with a Muslim majority population in the Middle East (and Europe) and as a bulwark against Soviet expansion. By the 1970s, while Turks embraced modernization through Europeanization, they also felt compelled to rely on themselves at times to defend their nation and its secular democracy.

The Turkish Republic did its best to bid farewell to empire. But Turkish leaders were not willing to abandon all memories of an imperial past or all responsibility for Turks living abroad.
In 1974, Turkey sent military forces to Cyprus. The declared mission: to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority during intercommunal clashes following a coup inspired by Greece’s junta that toppled the democratically elected government of Archbishop Makarios. Europeans denounced that military operation as an invasion of a sovereign country, bringing the Turkish bid for a place in Europe to a halt. Ankara viewed that criticism from Europe as a price it had to pay for fulfilling what it regarded as its responsibility as a guarantor of Turkish Cypriot security under the Treaties of Guarantee, which it had concluded with Greece and the United Kingdom in 1960.

The Cyprus crisis also damaged Ankara’s relations with the United States, but Ankara and Washington remained close NATO allies. This partnership was strengthened in the 1980s, when Prime Minister and President Turgut Özal liberalized Turkey economically and politically, and especially when Turkey supported the United States (albeit belatedly) in the Persian Gulf War of 1990. Many Kemalists, including those on the general staff, opposed Özal’s backing of the U.S. invasion of Iraq as a violation of Atatürk’s admonition against enmeshing Turkey in conflicts in the Middle East. Özal countered that it was time for a bold Turkish foreign policy that moved beyond a status quo vision. The wily and shrewd Özal said that it was better for Turkey to have a seat at the table than be on the menu. By siding with the United States, Turkey could secure economic and strategic benefits following the inevitable U.S. victory, which would greatly outweigh the advantages of continued isolationism.
Turkey’s support for U.S. efforts during the Persian Gulf War laid the foundation for a strategic partnership between Ankara and Washington. Though many Turks were disappointed that they did not receive even more benefits from such support, top Turkish government officials were grateful for Washington’s goodwill. And the United States tried to compensate Turkey for economic hardship resulting from the U.S.-led embargo of Iraq, Turkey’s southern neighbor and primary oil supplier. Washington led the charge at the International Monetary Fund in securing massive loans to keep the Turkish economy afloat.

Washington also helped Ankara elevate its strategic importance by emphasizing Turkey’s role as the strategic connection between Europe and the former Soviet states of Central Asia/the Caucasus. This vision of a new Silk Road evolved into a shared Turkish-American effort to develop an east-west corridor to deliver Caspian oil and gas to European and global markets. The two nations expanded their partnership to include Azerbaijan and Georgia, culminating in two of the world’s most complex and strategically significant energy pipelines, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and South Caucasus gas lines.

This vision of a more strategically relevant Turkey appealed to the Kemalists, who were eager to reconnect with their Turkic kin to the east. Some Islamists, like the Gülenists, also sought a foreign policy shift toward the east, which would enable them to revive common Islamic roots with Turkic countries. The United States welcomed Turkey’s readiness to help bolster the sovereignty, independence, and prosperity of these new countries, while diversifying global energy supplies.
Tensions nevertheless remained in bilateral relations. A central issue was the U.S. request for Turkish support in defending Iraq’s Kurdish population following the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Kemalists feared that by protecting Iraqi Kurds near the Turkey-Iraq border, Ankara might aggravate separatist tensions that could spill into Turkey’s Kurdish community, which sought autonomy and/or independence. Those concerns rekindled historic Kemalist suspicions that the Euro-Atlantic community might support the Kurds’ quest for an autonomous entity in southeastern Turkey. They recalled how European powers used U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s call for self-determination at the end of World War I to demand an independent Kurdistan in the Treaty of Sevres, which was forced on a feeble Ottoman government.

Despite such concerns, Ankara granted Washington’s request to allow American planes to patrol and enforce a no-fly zone in northern Iraq from Incirlik Airbase near Adana in south central Turkey. Washington worked to assuage Ankara’s fear of Kurdish separatism by cooperating on counterterrorism, especially by providing crucial support in capturing Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the terrorist Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) hiding in Kenya in 1999.

The ability of Washington and Ankara to manage historical fears and foster operational cooperation on these complex and sensitive security issues generated a new and positive mood in bilateral relations. That in turn enabled Turkish leaders to think more broadly about security partnership. In the late 1990s, Turkey expanded this developing pattern of cooperation to include the United States’ closest ally in the Middle
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East, Israel. As the only other democracy in the Middle East, Israel’s secular government and European orientation made it a logical partner for Ankara, despite anti-Israeli sentiment among Muslims in other countries.

For several decades, Ankara had tempered its response to international crises involving Israel. Turkey had been one of the first countries to recognize Israel (in 1949) and had not supported the Arabs in either the 1967 or the 1973 wars. In the 1980s and 1990s, Turkey and Israel recognized their shared interests in protecting their secular democratic systems against Iran’s Islamism and Syria’s support for the PKK and anti-Israel terrorists. Together with the United States, the two counties developed an informal partnership to counter the Iranian and Syrian threats, as Ankara strove to ensure Atatürk’s goal of peace at home and peace in the world.

New Foreign Policy Trends in the 1990s

While successive Turkish governments were strengthening co-operation with the United States and Israel into strategic partnerships in defense of Euro-Atlantic solidarity and secular democracy, Turkey’s Islamist leaders were moving in a different direction. The Islamists sought to revive a pan-Islamic identity in which Turks would be part of a global Islamic community. During his brief period of rule in 1996–97, Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan sought alliances, and a place for Turkey, in the Islamic world. Islamist political strategists believed globalization would generate backlash; nations would
protect their identities by embracing their local cultures, which for Turkish Islamists would mean restoring Islam as a key determinant of the Turkish identity, with *sharia* as a core principle of governance. They argued that Turkey could become a major power by restoring its connections with Muslim countries of the post-Ottoman “space.”

Reacting to this Islamist push, many nationalists and mainstream Kemalists pressed Ankara to reorient its foreign policy around Turkey’s historical ties to its Turkic brethren to the east. The collapse of the Soviet Union had created new opportunities for Turkish political, military, and business leaders to revive pan-Turkism in Azerbaijan and Central Asia. In addition, in the mid-1990s, Turkish President Süleyman Demirel collaborated with his Georgian and Azerbaijani counterparts, Eduard Shevardnadze and Heydar Aliyev, respectively, in calling for restoration of the fabled Great Silk Road, which had linked Asia and Europe via trade routes stretching across the Caspian Sea and South Caucasus into Turkey. As noted above, the United States embraced this vision, and President Bill Clinton joined the three regional presidents in pursuing the east-west energy corridor consisting of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and South Caucasus gas pipelines.

During the late ’90s, a third foreign policy trend, known as Eurasianism, emerged in narrow Kemalist circles in response to both the Turkish government’s embrace of the United States and the Islamists’ strong preference for closer relations with fellow Muslims. The Eurasianists held that Turkey’s national interests were no longer served by acting as the West’s
junior partner. Instead, Turkey should form a strategic alliance with Eurasian powers Russia and Iran, which had threatened Turkey’s vital interests in previous centuries but with whom Ankara could now work to foster a new era of economic growth and regional stability. Perhaps surprisingly, some of the key proponents of the Eurasianist vision, which ran counter to Atatürk’s call for Turkey to keep aligning itself with the West, were senior Turkish military officers. They chafed at the Europeans having invited former Ottoman dependencies and Warsaw Pact adversaries (such as Romania and Bulgaria) to join the EU ahead of NATO ally Turkey.

All three alternative foreign policy visions were nationalist at their core, sharing a sense of frustration that the West had not helped Turkey realize its full strategic potential. The adherents of these visions shared the concern that Turkey was still perceived as the sick man of Europe and insisted that Turkey assert itself to remind the world it was too strategically important to be ignored. This combination of insecurity and pride led the Islamists and Eurasianists to distrust the Euro-Atlantic community. The pan-Turkists welcomed cooperation with the United States to elevate Turkey’s strategic impact on the South Caucasus and Central Asia. But they shared the ambition of the Islamists and Eurasianists to nudge Turkish foreign policy in new directions. Members of all three schools sought to move Turkey away from passive partnership with the Euro-Atlantic community and from a position on the periphery of the West, toward active assertion of the nation’s role as a regional power.
AKP Foreign-Policy Reorientation

Those contending views of strategy provided the context for the AKP to develop its own foreign policy following its November 2002 electoral victory. The party’s key foreign policy theorist was Ahmet Davutoğlu, a brilliant professor who became chief foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Erdoğan and then foreign minister. Davutoğlu laid out the fundamentals of his thinking in his influential book, Strategic Depth: Turkey’s International Position (2001). This philosophical and political treatise recognized that the end of the Cold War had generated new challenges and fresh opportunities for Turkey to elevate its strategic significance as a major regional power. Rather than limiting its role to serving as a “wing” of the Euro-Atlantic community, Davutoğlu argued, Turkey should enhance its strategic value to the West and the world by adding to its foreign policy agenda such new tasks as mediating conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and expanding Turkey’s diplomatic and commercial opportunities in Africa and Latin America.

At the core of Davutoğlu’s vision was the quest for Turkey to have “zero problems with its neighbors.” By resolving all serious disputes with neighboring countries, Turkey could become a regional locomotive of peace and prosperity, thereby serving the fundamental interests of its Euro-Atlantic allies and remaining consistent with Atatürk’s fundamental foreign policy tenet.

Critics label Davutoğlu’s approach “Neo-Ottomanism,” suggesting a combination of imperiousness and Islamism that
shifts the primary axis of Turkish foreign policy from an east-west vector (extending from Turkey through NATO/EU to the United States) to a north-south axis (stretching from Russia to Iran and Turkey’s other Muslim neighbors). Davutoğlu rejects these characterizations. He notes that Turkey is engaging with surrounding countries not out of post-imperial nostalgia but due to inescapable factors of geography and history, which dictate a range of connections between Turkey and the successor states of the Ottoman Empire. He calls for Turkey to rely on its “soft power” of diplomacy and economic engagement to take advantage of these manifold cultural and historical links to foster regional stability and economic integration. In response to accusations that Ankara is using its soft power to foster pan-Islamist solidarity, Davutoğlu notes that only four of Turkey’s twelve neighbors have Muslim-majority populations, and that Ankara is deepening its engagement with NATO and the EU as it resolves bilateral problems with Syria and Iran.

The AKP and the Middle East: Realpolitik and Islamism

The debate outlined above is playing out with particular vigor in the Middle East. The AKP’s critics argue that Ankara’s current foreign policy departs from decades of adherence to Atatürk’s admonition to avoid entanglements in the Middle East, except in rare instances when Turkey’s vital national interests are at stake. During the 1990s, Turkey’s one key relationship in the Middle East was a strategic partnership with Israel.
Under the AKP, however, the Turkish government has reversed this strategy, seeking deeper engagement with Arab states and distancing itself from Israel. Rather than sustaining a strategic partnership, Ankara now treats Israel as a subject for mediation efforts on a par with Arab states. Since 2004, Turkey has thus sought to expand its ties with Syria and mediate the Syria-Israel conflict, even when the Euro-Atlantic community and Israel pressed for isolation of the Asad regime. During 2007–08, Turkey hosted five rounds of indirect talks between Syria and Israel but suspended this effort after harshly criticizing Israel’s military operations in Gaza (see below). In 2006, Turkey sent peacekeeping forces to Lebanon following the brief war between Israel and Hezbollah; since then, it has tried to foster reconciliation among Lebanon’s fractious political groupings, while criticizing Israel for its military operation into Lebanon. The AKP government has offered to mediate the Israel-Palestinian conflict, even while focusing its efforts on providing financial and technical assistance to Palestinian authorities (primarily Hamas in Gaza) and sharply criticizing Israel.

The Turkish government contends that such efforts reflect not an ideological push to replace Israel with Muslim-majority Middle Eastern states as key partners but a desire to foster regional peace and economic integration. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu often argues with conviction that because the share of Turkey’s total trade volume accounted for by commerce with neighboring Syria, Iran, and Iraq increased during the period of 2003 to 2009 from 8 percent to 32 percent, the Turkish economy weathered the 2008–09 global economic
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downturn with less damage relative to other major economies. But Turkey’s sharp political attacks on Israel starting 2009 suggest that other factors were involved.

Israel’s military operation in Gaza in late 2008 shook the Turkish government, which was hosting indirect talks between Israel and Syria that seemed on the verge of a breakthrough. The AKP government was thus upset at the timing of the Israeli operation and repulsed by what it characterized as “inhumane” attacks on Palestinian civilians. The harshness of Turkey’s criticism of Israel was unprecedented. It exploded on the world stage at the 2009 World Economic Forum cited above. During a panel discussion, while Israeli President Peres tried to explain the Gaza incursion from Israel’s perspective, Prime Minister Erdoğan accused Israel of transforming Gaza into an “open-air prison” and said, “I know very well how you hit and killed children on beaches.” Erdoğan then stormed off the stage in anger, stunning President Peres, the audience in Davos, and many in the international community. When a journalist asked about Peres’ reply to her husband’s accusations, Emine Erdoğan said tearfully, “All of it was lies.”

In the immediate aftermath of that confrontation, the AKP pursued an anti-Israel course. Upon returning to Istanbul airport, Prime Minister Erdoğan was greeted by a cheering throng of approximately 5,000 early in the morning. The emotionally charged demonstrators carried Turkish and Hamas flags and signs proclaiming “Erdoğan, the new Saladdin” (referring to the Muslim leader who recaptured Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187), “Erdoğan, our Conqueror” (referring to
Mehmet II, who conquered Constantinople in 1453), and “Erdoğan, a new world leader.” The prime minister suggested that Israel be ousted from the United Nations and called on the UN to condemn Israeli “war crimes” in Gaza.

Internationally, reaction among non-Arabs to Erdoğan’s outburst in Davos ranged from disappointment to shock. In the United States, the American Jewish Committee, for years a strong supporter of Turkey, declared the attack on President Peres and Israel “a public disgrace” and “gasoline on the fire of surging anti-Semitism.” Academics and civil-society activists in Washington and many parts of Europe lamented that Erdoğan’s anti-Israel vitriol would make it impossible for Turkey to help mediate the Middle East peace process. In October 2009, Turkey refused to invite Israel to a joint military exercise that also included the United States and Italy, an event that had occurred annually since the mid-1990s, citing lingering anger over Israel’s raid into Gaza in 2008. After the United States and Italy withdrew from the exercise in protest, a high-ranking Israeli government official told the Israeli daily Ma’ariv that Israel and other Western countries were concerned that Erdoğan was leading Turkey through a gradual “process of Islamization.” Added the official, “Until today, Turkey has been the antithesis of Iran—a secular Muslim country with a tolerant constitution, which would like to become a member of the European Union.”

Many observers note that the drift toward Islamization is also evident in AKP’s approach to the Palestinian authorities. They argue that if Ankara’s sole aim was to improve relations
with its neighbors (and near neighbors), it would seek close relations with both secular President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah and Islamist Hamas leaders in Gaza. Instead, the Turkish government has broken with Abbas, whom Erdoğan disparaged as the “head of an illegitimate government,” and called on the world to “recognize Hamas as the legitimate government of the Palestinian people.” Turkey’s AKP government was also the first to extend an official invitation to Khaled Meshal, the Syrian-based leader of Hamas’s militant wing, whom the West condemns as a terrorist leader. That action marked a sharp departure with previous Turkish governments, which considered Hamas a terrorist and Islamist organization that threatened the existence of Israel and secular governments in general.

A particularly stark example of this apparent shift toward pan-Islamism in the AKP’s foreign policy is Turkey’s budding relationship with Sudan. The government chose Sudan, a veritable pariah in the international order of states, as a key ally on the continent. Prime Minister Erdoğan broke with his European and American allies over Sudan during his 2006 visit to that country, when he proclaimed that no genocide had occurred there. The government twice welcomed Sudanese President al-Bashir to Turkey in 2008. Then, the following January, the day after his attack in Davos on Israel for “killing innocent civilians,” Erdoğan invited the Sudanese vice president Ali Osman Taha to visit Ankara. All that occurred in the face of near-universal condemnation (including by the International Criminal Court) of Sudan’s genocidal campaign...
against its own citizens. The prime minister responded to criticism of his embrace of Sudan’s leaders by claiming in November 2009 that “a Muslim cannot commit genocide.”

The AKP’s efforts to improve Turkey’s relations with Saudi Arabia also seem to indicate a pan-Islamist shift in foreign policy. Previous Turkish governments had usually held the Saudi regime at arm’s length, fearing an invasion by the country’s Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, which seeks to replace secular democracies around the globe with sharia rule. Although Turgut Özal briefly cultivated Saudi détente during his presidency, the Kemalist military and civilian establishments scuttled his efforts, and subsequent Turkish governments did not restart them. But in 2006, Erdoğan invited King Abdullah to make the first visit to Turkey by a Saudi king in 40 years. During his third visit, two years later, Erdoğan and President Gül took the unprecedented step of visiting the king at his hotel, rather than receiving him in a governmental office in accordance with universal diplomatic practice.

An analogous shift—of longer standing—also seems evident in the AKP government’s approach to Iran, which, like Sudan, has a radical Islamist regime. Nearly all previous Turkish governments had kept their distance from Tehran, as they did from Riyadh, fearing the potential spread of Islamist thinking to Turkey. But Erbakan and his fellow Islamists welcomed the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Three decades later, an AKP government made Turkey the first NATO country to host a visit by Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Erdoğan refers to Ahmadinejad by affectionate title “değerli kardeşim,” which means “my dear brother.” AKP leaders make a spirited de-
fense of their outreach to Iran, citing the two countries’ stable border since 1639, growing economic ties, and common fight against PKK terrorists.

Despite their declared opposition to nuclear weapons in principle, the AKP leaders, and Erdoğan in particular, further argue that Iran’s pursuit of peaceful nuclear technologies is justified, given Israel’s assumed possession of nuclear weapons. The AKP consistently avoids answering questions about whether it believes that Tehran is trying to develop them. Turkey has stood apart from the United States, and even Russia and China, in refusing to condemn Iran’s nuclear enrichment program at the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency in November 2009. This dissembling with regard to Iran, coupled with harsh attacks on Israel, marks such a profound departure from Turkey’s previous policies that something beyond realpolitik must be an important factor. Many observers increasingly believe this additional factor to be a pan-Islamist vision shared by the Turkish and Iranian governments.

Turkey-EU Relations: Commitment or Deception?

The AKP’s Kemalist opponents also warn that an Islamist tint is coloring Turkey’s relations with its European allies. One stark indicator was Ankara’s opposition to the candidacy of Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen as NATO Secretary General in 2009. The Turkish government protested that a Danish secretary general would alienate the world’s Muslims, some of whom, in 2006, reacted angrily to satirical
images of the Prophet Muhammad published in Danish newspapers. Another indicator, that same year, was Turkey's decision to join Spain as co-chair of the UN’s Alliance of Civilizations, which aims to foster dialogue and cooperation between the West and the Islamic world. Kemalist critics argued the AKP was positioning Turkey as the representative of the “Muslim world” and a counterpart to the West, rather than as a member of the West. Senior AKP members strengthened that perception through frequent attacks on Western Europe as “Islamophobic,” and Erdoğan’s designation of the West as “immoral.” Ankara further distanced itself from its Euro-Atlantic allies in the wake of the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008, when it launched its Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform with Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, but without the United States and the EU.

Senior AKP leaders argue that they are simply adding fresh initiatives to a foreign policy agenda that reflects both new post-Cold War opportunities and continuing commitment to Euro-Atlantic engagement. Party leaders stress that they are deepening Turkey’s engagement in Afghanistan—through the training of Afghan military and police, financial assistance, and a provincial reconstruction team, as well as a third term commanding the International Security Assistance Force in that country. They further argue that they have done more to advance Turkey’s EU candidacy during seven years in power than other governments have done during the previous 40 years. (AKP leaders attribute a sharp decrease in the EU’s approval rating among Turks to European leaders treating Turkey’s candidacy unfairly; many Turks cite in particular the preference
of French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel for Turkey to have no more than “privileged [rather than full] partnership.”

In addition, Turks have grown disillusioned with the EU over the Cyprus problem. In 2003, at the height of its effort to convince the EU to begin accession talks with Turkey, the AKP broke with four decades of national policy and withdrew support from Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş. His stubbornness and determination in supporting Turkish Cypriots’ political rights and a Turkish identity on the island won him strong popularity among Kemalists in Turkey. But Western leaders viewed Denktaş as obstructive and unreasonable. After the AKP government abandoned him, he was replaced as “president” following the election in 2004 of the more moderate Mehmet Ali Talat.

The AKP government then pressed Turkish Cypriots to accept the Cyprus settlement plan drafted by then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. In a landmark referendum in April 2004, they approved the Annan plan, but Greek Cypriots rejected it. The AKP won considerable support from the EU and the United States for taking these bold and constructive steps on Cyprus. The EU dealt itself another black eye, in the view of Turks across the political spectrum, by subsequently failing to fulfill its pledge to enhance trade ties with the Turkish Cypriot community.

Popular support for the EU in Turkey plummeted from its high of 70 percent in 2002. In 2007, according to a survey by the German Marshall Fund, it stood at 32 percent. In addition, the survey showed that only 34 percent of Turks
reported feeling that they share common values with the West, and that 55 percent of Turks (and 57 percent of Europeans) believed that Turkey as a nation does not share the core values of Europe or the Western tradition.

It is perhaps impossible to discern whether this sharp decline in Turkish support for the EU results more from the rhetoric and policies of European leaders or from those of the AKP. Many Kemalists believe that the AKP has followed a tactical and cynical approach to EU accession. In their view, the party initially consolidated its domestic and international support by offering reassurance that Turkey would remain committed to EU accession, but later used the EU accession process to restore Islam as the prime determinant of Turkish identity.

Immediately after its 2002 electoral victory, the AKP’s critics say, the party started working on a package of constitutional reforms to fulfill EU criteria for beginning accession talks. Senior AKP leaders regularly visited Brussels and other European capitals to make Turkey’s case. When, in October 2005, the EU finally began accession talks with Turkey, the AKP seemed legitimized as a pro-Western political party pursuing Turkey’s traditional foreign policy, and support for the EU among pro-Western liberal Turks increased significantly. After October 2005, however, the Turkish parliament seemed to slow progress on EU-mandated reforms and instead pursued legal changes that would advance an Islamist social agenda, such as allowing female students to wear the Islamic headscarf in universities. Erdoğan disclosed his priorities in his remarkable statement in Berlin in 2008, when he urged
Germany’s large Turkish population to resist assimilation into mainstream German society, calling assimilation a “crime against humanity.”5 If Turkey were to enter the European society of nations, the AKP seemed determined that it enter it as a Muslim nation.

U.S.-Turkish Relations: Breakdown . . .

Turkey’s waning enthusiasm for the EU between 2003 and 2005 coincided with a dramatic deterioration in its relationship with its most important ally, the United States. While the governments of both countries subsequently worked hard to restore a sense of dependable cooperation, the U.S.-Turkish partnership has yet to regain the level it enjoyed in the late 1990s.

Washington’s confidence in its strong relationship with Ankara was shattered on March 1, 2003, when the Turkish parliament voted to reject the United States’ request to transport troops and military equipment across Turkey and into Iraq. The vote occurred after months of negotiations over economic, political, and military agreements plus an $8 billion U.S.-assistance program (which could have grown into more than $20 billion in loan guarantees). The unusual nature of the vote prompted suspicions in Washington that the AKP had found a clever way to reject the U.S. request without appearing to do so intentionally. Initially, parliament voted to approve the U.S. request, but then nullified the action on procedural grounds (the presence of too many non-voting deputies on the floor denied a quorum by three votes).
Rather than managing AKP’s parliamentary faction to ensure a positive vote, Prime Minister Erdoğan simply asked his party’s deputies to vote “with their conscience.” Top Washington officials were disappointed with what appeared to be a lack of AKP commitment to secure a positive outcome for perhaps the most important vote in the history of American-Turkish relations. U.S. Defense Department officials were also upset with the Kemalists, especially the military. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz lamented at the time that the Turkish military “did not play the strong leadership role . . . that we would have expected.”

Despite their deep disappointment with that vote, senior U.S. officials tried to avoid a breakdown in American-Turkish relations on the eve of the war in Iraq. Although it was at that juncture impossible to proceed with the original U.S. deal, Washington did offer Ankara a $1 billion grant to help sustain international confidence in the Turkish banking system and economy should the upcoming war threaten to destabilize the Turkish economy. Congress required only that to receive the grant, Turkey must maintain its IMF-agreed reform program (to promote the confidence mentioned above) and refrain from unilateral military action in northern Iraq.

Turkish leaders across the political spectrum reacted negatively to this U.S. assistance offer, misinterpreting it as an attempt by the United States to dictate economic and military policy to their government. In hindsight, the AKP appears to have opposed the war in principle; Davutoğlu, then the top foreign affairs advisor to the prime minister, joined other AKP leaders in warning against Turkey being seen as a war-maker.
by granting the U.S. request. Many parliamentarians believed that their “no” vote would stop the war—the United States would be unable to attack Iraq without Turkey’s support—and Turkey would emerge as a major regional power that had secured peace.

Elements of the Turkish military also opposed the war. They worried that the United States had no plan for post-war Iraq. They feared that after Saddam Hussein’s dictatorial rule, a power vacuum would emerge, and Iraq’s various ethnic and sectarian groups could pull the country apart. That could lead to an Iraqi Kurdish push for autonomy, which could spill into Turkey, where the army had been at war for over a decade with Kurdish separatists and PKK terrorists at a cost of over 40,000 Turkish lives. Such fears were aggravated by talk in U.S. academic and political circles of possible autonomy for Iraq’s Kurdish region, echoing historical recollections of the 1920 Treaty of Sévres, when European powers forced the Ottoman authorities to accept an autonomous Kurdish region as they schemed to divide Turkish lands among themselves. President Bush attempted to counter these fears by pledging to Prime Minister Erdoğan that the United States would help eliminate the threat posed by PKK terrorists based in northern Iraq and operating in Turkey.

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein, as weeks and months passed with no U.S. military action against PKK terrorists in northern Iraq, Turkish military commanders grew frustrated with the United States. These tensions exacerbated suspicions among many Turkish officers that Washington had helped engineer the AKP’s electoral victory in 2002. Fueling that suspi-
cion was the fact that Bush had hosted Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the White House in December 2002, before he had been elected to parliament and while he was still banned from politics for his conviction of subversion.

Meanwhile, the U.S. military was losing faith in their Turkish counterparts. Many U.S. officers blamed Turkey for increased U.S. casualties resulting from parliament’s decision to deny the United States the “Northern Option” that would have allowed an attack against Iraq from both north and south. They worried that the Turkish military was contemplating unilateral operations against the PKK in northern Iraq. U.S. commanders also grew annoyed with Ankara’s urging Washington to divert troops from the main fight against Saddam Hussein’s supporters to the North. And they further worried that the Turkish Special Forces were fomenting political unrest between Ankara’s Turkoman clients and the Kurdish population of northern Iraq, especially in the volatile city of Kirkuk.

Amid these tensions, on July 4, 2003, American soldiers arrested, and placed hoods over the heads of, eleven Turkish Special Forces officers in the Iraqi city of Sulaymaniyah. U.S. military officials were outraged by the presence of these crack Turkish troops, out of uniform and in a politically volatile area of northern Iraq. U.S. military leaders accused the captured Turkish soldiers of plotting to assassinate local Kurdish officials, which could have generated a wave of political instability and violence in the one region of Iraq that was relatively stable.
Turkish soldiers and private citizens, for their part, were enraged that their proud Special Forces officers were humiliated by their key NATO ally and treated like terrorists. For many in the lower ranks of the Turkish military, that amounted to an unforgivable insult by the United States, and it heightened anti-American sentiments in Turkish society at large. Most Turks did not notice when, months later, several Turkish Special Forces commanders were disciplined and/or demoted for their responsibility in the Sulaymaniyah incident. The damage had been done: distrust had increased significantly among important segments of the population in both countries.

Turkey’s general public now began to blame the United States for renewed terrorism and ethnic tension emanating from Turkey’s Kurdish population. A wave of anti-Americanism swept across popular culture. The novel Metal Storm became a runaway bestseller with a plot that featured the United States launching a war against Turkey, and Turkey being saved by a Special Forces soldier who detonates a nuclear weapon and vaporizes Washington, D.C. At around the same time, the film Valley of the Wolves: Iraq became a blockbuster, with its portrayal of U.S. troops in Iraq as bloodthirsty Christian fundamentalists who enjoy slaughtering innocent Iraqis. The film includes graphic and incendiary dramatizations of the Sulaymaniyah incident, Abu Ghraib prison, and a fictional American Jewish doctor harvesting human organs. Valley of the Wolves was the largest-budget film produced in Turkey to date, and was accepted by tens of millions of Turks as a truthful portrayal of their American ally.
Rather than correcting these incendiary mischaracterizations of the United States, prominent AKP figures fanned growing anti-Americanism. Speaker of Parliament Bülent Arınç praised _Valley of the Wolves_ as “a great film that will go down in history.” When asked by the state-owned Anatolia News Agency whether he believed the movie reflected reality, he replied with an astounding “yes, exactly.” Prime Minister Erdoğan’s wife, Emine, proclaimed that she felt “proud” watching the film. In April 2004, Mehmet Elkatmış, chairman of parliament’s human rights commission, accused the United States of “committing genocide and a violent crime against humanity” during its siege of Falluja, Iraq. “Neither the Pharaohs, nor Hitler and Mussolini, had committed such crimes,” Elkatmış added. He further suggested that the United States might have deployed nuclear weapons in Iraq, while Prime Minister Erdoğan opined that weapons of mass destruction might have been used in Falluja.

As with AKP’s harsh attacks on Israel (and the subsidized publication of _Mein Kampf_ and _The Protocols of the Elders of Zion_ at this same time), the vitriol of the above statements by senior AKP leaders seemed to prove an agenda derived from considerations far beyond those of realpolitik. After all, if Turkish leaders worried about destabilization spilling from Iraq into Turkey, it made little sense to stoke popular anger against the country that was leading an international coalition in Iraq. Many observers, even Kemalists who felt frustrated by the U.S. decision to launch the war in Iraq over Turkey’s objection, surmised that the AKP was exploiting anti-American sentiment to appeal to fellow Muslims and Islamists and advance the party’s larger agenda.
Gradually, the AKP government softened its rhetoric, realizing that the political costs of estranging its most important ally outweighed the ideological benefits of appealing to the world’s Islamists. The United States had been trying to repair relations with Turkey since 2004, when it pressed successfully for a NATO summit to be held in Istanbul that June.

... and Rebuilding

Prime Minister Erdoğan’s visit to Washington a year later marked a turning point on Turkey’s part. Following his meeting in the Oval Office with President Bush, Erdoğan began to issue statements referring to the United States as Turkey’s friend and partner. Such statements helped build diplomatic momentum, as U.S. and Turkish diplomats worked together to assemble a common set of shared interests to repair the bilateral partnership. Their efforts culminated in July 2006 with the signing of the “Shared Vision Document,” which outlined ten core areas for cooperation and regularized joint efforts by forming bilateral working groups.

A true breakthrough between Washington and Ankara occurred when Bush and Erdoğan met in November 2007. Immediately following that discussion, Bush announced in the Oval Office, with Erdoğan at his side, that the United States considered the PKK an enemy of Turkey and therefore of the United States, and that the two leaders had agreed on a new intelligence-sharing mechanism to facilitate joint efforts to defeat the terrorist group. Official relations between the two
governments steadily improved, with Ankara finally satisfied that the United States was fulfilling Bush’s pledge of four and a half years earlier to prevent northern Iraq from remaining a sanctuary for the PKK.

Nonetheless, popular anti-Americanism remained strong in Turkey. People across Turkey’s political spectrum blamed President Bush’s foreign policy for the decline in U.S. popularity. They anticipated that a new U.S. president would bring a return of traditionally positive Turkish attitudes toward the United States. Indeed, most Turks cheered the 2008 election of Barack Obama, believing that an American president with a Muslim heritage would be able to appreciate issues relevant to the “Muslim world.” A president with the middle name Hussein stood in stark contrast to the evangelical Christian George W. Bush, who many Turks believed had embarked upon a twenty-first-century “Crusade” after the September 11 terror attacks. Residents of a remote village in Turkey even sacrificed forty-four sheep to celebrate President Obama’s election as the forty-fourth President.

In April 2009, Obama made Turkey the first stop on his initial overseas trip, which also included several European destinations. The U.S. president was making a conscious effort to restore a sense of partnership in American-Turkish relations—and subtly underscoring U.S. support for Turkey’s EU aspirations. (This was, after all, an explicitly European trip.) He delivered to the Turkish parliament a thoughtful speech that demonstrated an understanding of Turkey’s strategic potential as a key partner for the Euro-Atlantic community and as a secular democracy with a Muslim majority population.
The AKP’s Foreign Policy

The visit won the new president a measure of popular acclaim in Turkey, with many analysts claiming that bilateral relations were back to normal. In Istanbul, he helped broker a historic agreement between Turkey and Armenia to normalize their relations, reopen and recognize their border, and examine their sometimes tragic and painful history (especially the mass killings and forced exile of over one million Armenians by Ottoman troops in 1915). Following the Obama visit, the United States embraced the AKP’s expressed desire to improve relations with its neighbors, especially in the Middle East, and help mediate conflicts there, while also collaborating on issues involving Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Yet despite the success of Obama’s trip to Turkey and his administration’s effort to bolster American-Turkish relations, the United States remained more unpopular in Turkey than in any other country in the world. As mentioned earlier, a Pew poll in summer 2009 found that favorability toward the United States had risen in Turkey by only two percentage points following the presidential visit.

That statistic greatly surprised many U.S. and European observers. It appeared that the United States’ unpopularity in Turkey could not be dismissed as “anti-Bushism” but reflected instead a deeper form of anti-Americanism that had emerged since the AKP came to power in late 2002. Clearly, U.S. military actions in Iraq and a conviction that the Bush administration was pursuing a global “war against Islam” catalyzed popular sentiment. Yet the unprecedented depth of the sentiment remained surprising: 71 percent of Turks considering their strategic partner of 2001 a “potential military
threat” in June 2003. That suggested that Turkey’s political leaders had stoked anti-U.S. sentiment.

In its relations with Washington, as with Israel, the Palestinian authorities, Sudan, and Iran, the AKP government seemed driven at least in part by a pan-Islamist agenda. At times, it required the AKP to depict the United States as less an ally than an adversary. The Obama diplomacy could neither change that tactic nor drain Turkish political swamps of anti-Americanism; that sentiment, in Turkey as in other Muslim lands, had assumed a force of its own, beyond reason and rational analysis.

At the same time, the AKP government has also demonstrated a growing understanding that it cannot completely ignore the forces of realpolitik. Perhaps no Turkish government, regardless of its ideology, can escape Ankara’s enduring commitment to sustain a Turkish Cypriot community on Cyprus or to work in partnership wherever possible with the United States. Political reality also drives Ankara’s growing cooperation with Russia, which emerged in 2008 as Turkey’s largest trading partner (and supplier of nearly two-thirds of its natural gas).

Turkish foreign policy is undeniably in a state of flux. A mix of Islamist ideology and realpolitik has redirected Ankara away from its reliance on NATO and the United States as the foundation of national security. Today, Turkey is renewing its aspiration to emerge as an indispensable leader in the vast region stretching from the Balkans to the Altai Mountains and the Persian Gulf. Such ambition, reflected in the AKP’s slogan of “Zero problems with Turkey’s neighbors,” faces inherent
contradictions. Azerbaijan, traditionally one of Turkey’s closest allies, is furious with the latter’s effort to normalize relations with Armenia in the absence of a settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that fuels Azerbaijan’s long-running feud with Armenia. Troubled relations with Baku complicate Turkey’s quest to elevate its strategic importance to the EU as the key transit state for diversified flows of natural gas to Europe from Azerbaijan.

Despite those contradictory elements, Ankara’s quest to advance peace and prosperity in many of its neighboring countries reflects key objectives of the Euro-Atlantic community. In light of the challenges and opportunities posed by the AKP’s approach to foreign affairs, the key foreign policy test for Turkey and its Western allies in coming years will be to insulate their 50-year partnership from the strains posed by some of the AKP’s Islamist convictions and ambitions.