*Viewpoints* Special Edition

# I am from Adana, Welcome to Beirut: How Identity, Soap Operas, and Trade are Transforming Turkey and the Arab World

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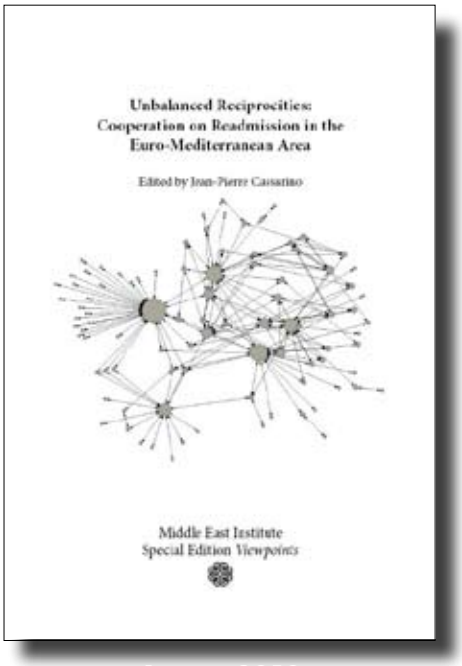


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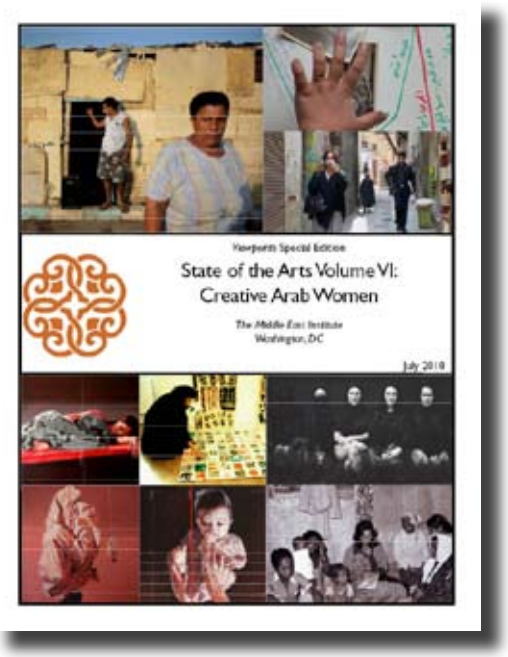


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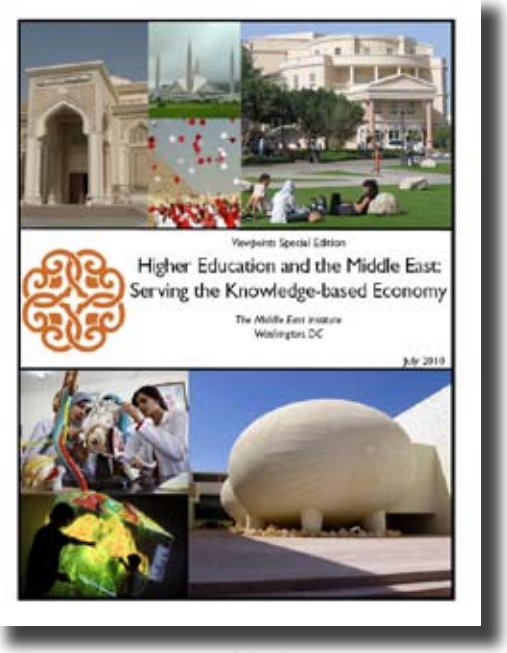


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# I am from Adana, Welcome to Beirut: How Identity, Soap Operas, and Trade are Transforming Turkey and the Arab World

A Special Edition of *Viewpoints*

# Introduction

The diplomatic confrontation between Israel and Turkey in the summer of 2010 over aid ships for Gaza brought into sharp relief Ankara's new policy of engagement in the Middle East.

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For years, Turkey had seen itself principally as a part of Europe and had viewed Israel as its chief regional partner. In the eyes of many Turks, Arabs were both backward and traitorous people, whose revolt had hastened the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and who had supported Turkey's regional enemies in the 20th century. For their part, many Arabs accused the Turks of having oppressed them during the Ottoman era and abandoning Islam after it.

While many Arab states sided with Moscow during the Cold War, Turkey joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and formed a strategic alliance with Washington. Since 2002, however, Ankara has integrated Turkey into regional economic and political structures, Arabs and Turks have rediscovered cultural ties, and bilateral trade and investment have expanded markedly.

The essays presented in this edition of *Viewpoints* seek to explain why Turkey's relations improved rapidly with the Arab world after 2002. Dr. Mustafa Gokcek, Assistant Professor of History at Niagara University, regards the relationship as a positive development for Turkey, the region, and the world. In his opinion, the new relationship reflects Turkey's new global foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in 2002, the popular rediscovery of Arab-Turkish historical ties in the Middle East, and the decline of "critical voices" which had bred mistrust between Arabs and Turks. Dr. Zafer Parlak, Assistant Professor of International Relations at Izmir University, believes that Turkey's new relationship with the Arab world should be hailed by all Turks as a success. He sees it as the product of the changing global environment and a quarter-century process by which Turks overcame the psychological trauma of having inherited a collapsed imperial state and seeing enemies behind all of their borders. While he believes that the relationship ultimately will be a positive one, he nonetheless worries that Turkey's growing ties with the Arab world and other countries in the region may jeopardize its relations with the West and undermine the nation's modernization and reform efforts.

# Arabs and Turks: How They Have Drawn Closer

*Mustafa Gokcek*

Turkey's growing links with the Arab world are evolving on multiple levels and reflect key shifts in the diplomacy, economy, and society of much of the Middle East. They also reflect Turkey's desire to utilize its close links to Western nations, its neighbors, and other nations to expand its economy and to have greater influence in global politics.

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The most obvious and rapid shifts in the Middle East are diplomatic and political. Since the election of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP) in 2002, Turkey has pursued an active role in Middle Eastern affairs. Under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his foreign policy advisor and now Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Ankara has diversified its foreign policy. While Turkey has kept its traditional ties to the West and NATO, it has also followed a non-ideological approach to Turkey's neighbors known as the "zero problem policy." This policy seeks to settle all disputes which directly or indirectly concern Ankara, including those with the Arab states. Over the last eight years, Arab officials have visited Turkey for political discussions, and regional political conferences have regularly been held in Ankara and Istanbul. Turkey has mediated the Arab-Israeli conflict and internal political disputes in Lebanon. Finally, Ankara has worked with Riyadh and other Arab capitals to curb the influence of Tehran and its political allies in Iraq.

Since 2008, Prime Minister Erdoğan has become a popular figure in his own right in the Middle East and the broader Islamic world. Many Arabs heralded him as one of their own after he angrily left a panel with Israeli President Shimon Peres at the 2009 Davos International Conference in protest of Israel's military actions in Gaza. His sharp rhetoric towards Israel during the 2010 Gaza Aid crisis has further reinforced his popularity among Arabs.

Still, the Turkish leader's popularity among the Arab masses has raised concerns among some Arab elites. They worry that Ankara's enhanced presence in the Arab world has come at their expense and that Ankara seeks to establish a new Ottoman Empire or neo-colonial rule over the empire's former Arab provinces. These elites also worry that Turkey's rhetoric regarding Israel will compel them to adopt positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict that are more confrontational than they otherwise would and potentially put them at odds with Western governments.

These fears are not without merit. During the crises over Gaza in 2009 and 2010, Erdoğan's

denunciations of Israeli actions forced a number of Arab governments to provide greater aid to the Palestinians and to issue scathing critiques of Israel — critiques at odds with Washington's approach to Israel and the crises. In addition, Saudi Arabia and many of the Gulf Arab monarchies fear that Turkey's commercial ties with Iran and diplomatic support of Iran's nuclear program emboldens Tehran and has strengthened the latter's influence in the Middle East.

As important as Ankara's regional diplomacy has been to improving its status in the Arab world, its open-door visa policy has been even more important. The policy has greatly facilitated travel, tourism, and economic integration. While Arabs have visited Turkey as tourists for many years, the number of Arabs visiting Turkey skyrocketed after the policy went into effect. Iraqis, Jordanians, Lebanese, and Syrians can all now visit Turkey without a visa and vice versa. Southeast Anatolia, Turkey's poorest region, has especially benefitted from regional economic integration with the Arab world. Thanks to new Arab consumers and Arab tourists, the region's economy has blossomed. Border communities in neighboring Arab states have also witnessed considerable economic growth after integrating into Turkey's economy.

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Regional economic integration has also spawned social integration. Arabs have become devoted fans of Turkish television soap operas. In fact, the streets of Arab cities I have visited were virtually empty when the shows were broadcast. Some Arabs spend hundreds of dollars for tours to the Turkish neighborhoods where the shows are set or to see the homes of famous Turkish actors. For many Arabs with whom I have spoken, Turkish soap operas evoke their ambivalence toward their northern neighbors. While many genuinely object to Turkey's seemingly secular and non-Islamic culture, they are also inexplicably drawn to its glamour, power, and wealth.

The "love-hate" relationship and the popularity of Turkish soap operas reflect widespread social changes that have been brewing beneath the surface in the Arab world and Turkey for more than a decade. Significantly, for much of the past century, secular and Western-oriented nationalists shaped how both Arabs and Turks viewed both their neighbors and their past. "Critical" voices in the Arab world stressed that the Turks had enslaved Arabs under the Ottoman Empire, thwarted the emergence of Arabs' national greatness, and were not true Muslims since they did not speak Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. By contrast, Turkish "critics" portrayed the Arabs as backward. According to this worldview, it was the treachery of the Arabs in World War I, their excessive religiosity, and fierce opposition to Western modernity that had held back the Turks and ultimately led to the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

Over the last decade, however, many Arabs and Turks have begun to move beyond these critical worldviews and assumptions. While they still cherish their national identities, they have sought out their pre-World War I roots and their shared past under the Ottoman Empire. For instance, I have met many families in the Arab world who have recently rediscovered their Turkish heritage and ties to Turkey. In the long run, it is these broader social forces rather than government policies that have opened the door for improved ties between Turkey and the governments of the Arab world

since 2002 and will continue to do so well into the future.

Nevertheless, Turkey's current relationship with the Arab world does not constitute a fundamental shift in its foreign policy or a viable "alternative" to its ties with Europe and the United States. In many respects, Turkey is decades ahead of the Arab countries economically, politically, and socially. Turkey is still part of the NATO alliance and Ankara has not abandoned its desire to join the European Union (EU). In fact, Turkey's trade with Europe far exceeds its trade with the Arab states or with Iran. Furthermore, Ankara and Washington share a common vision of a democratic, peaceful, and prosperous Middle East.

In this regard, Turkey is no different from the United States, which maintains very close relations with a host of nations that have poor bilateral relations with each other (e.g., Israel and Saudi Arabia or India and Pakistan). Within this framework, Ankara looks at Arab states in much the same way as it does other states — as partners that can help improve Turkey's strategic position and expand its economy. Here, it is worth noting that improved ties with Arab states opened markets for Turkish goods and won Ankara support in international organizations. In 2004, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states helped elect the first Turk to the office of Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Five years later, Arab states joined a host of Asian, African, and Western nations in supporting Turkey's successful bid for a rotating seat on the United Nations' Security Council (UNSC). The UN election was an especially important accomplishment for Turkey, since Ankara had not served on the Security Council since 1961. It also gave Ankara a platform to advance its views on the Iranian nuclear issue and a host of other international issues.

Still, as Turkey's government pursues its new grand foreign policy vision with Iran and the Arab world, we should not lose site of the importance of the broad social and economic changes that have taken place in Turkey and its Arab neighbors in recent years. These changes laid the groundwork for recent Turkish diplomacy by allowing Turks and Arabs to redefine their historical relationship for the first time since World War I and to rediscover longstanding social and cultural links.  With cross cultural trade and social-cultural links growing stronger by the day, Turkish-Arab political ties look set to grow even closer in the future.

# Turkey's New Foreign Policy Approach: "'Zero' or 'All' Problems with Neighbors Policy?"

*Zafer Parlak*

*Dr. Zafer Parlak is an Assistant Professor in the Department of American Culture and Literature, Izmir University (Izmir, Turkey). His areas of interest include US foreign policy, US diplomatic history, American politics, Turkish-American Relations, and the US Peace Corps in Turkey. He is currently working on a book on the Peace Corps experience in Turkey.*

In January 2010, I came face-to-face with my nation's complicated and deep-rooted relationship with the Arab world. As my non-Turkish friends and I left the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's memorial in downtown Beirut, we saw a large egg-shaped building that could have been a spaceship. Since the building was not in our guidebook, one of my friends asked a nearby guard what it was. After the guard explained that the building was an abandoned IMAX movie theater, my friend introduced himself, his wife, and then paused before finally introducing me. As he did so, I saw the guard's nametag and the root of my friend's anxiety: the guard was Armenian and it was not clear how he would react to my being a Turk. But the guard smiled broadly, and spoke to me in Turkish instead of Arabic: "*Ben de Adanaliyim. Beyrut'a hoşgeldiniz.*" (I am from Adana, [Turkey]. Welcome to Beirut.) Although he had never visited Turkey and his family had left Turkey over a century ago, he spoke Turkish fluently and explained that it was his native tongue. He easily could have passed for a native-born Turk from the southeast. He told me about his grandparents and parents — how they spoke Turkish and ate Turkish food, how they still watched Turkish television programs and listened to Turkish radio programs, and how they were still called "Turks." He insisted that I have dinner with them or at least come back to have tea with him. We embraced each other as if we had met a long-lost relative.

The idea that I would either visit Lebanon or meet an Armenian who would speak my mother tongue would have been inconceivable a quarter century ago when I came of age. During the 1970s and the 1980s, Turkey viewed its strategic interests and its national identity as aligned with the United States and Western Europe. Being unquestionably and totally pro-American (and hence anti-communist) was synonymous with Turkish nationalism. People who spoke of Turks' ethnic and cultural ties with people beyond Turkey's national borders were labeled ultra-nationalists or pan-Turks. Anyone who had interest in the Arab world or even Arabic as a language was a potential radical Islamist, whose loyalty was at best questionable. After all, the Arabs had plotted with the British and the French against the Ottoman Turks during World War I. Their revolt (1916–18) was perceived as a "stab in the back" by Turks, who had defended Mecca and Medina, the Muslim holy cities, from the British Empire. Arabs also exported radical Islam to Turkey, maintained claims to Turkish territory, allied with the Soviet Union, and could seemingly undermine Turkey's stability at any time. By contrast, Turkey was a member of the West-

ern alliance and had rightly rejected its Islamic, Arab, and regional ties — ties that had weakened the Turkish people and had contributed to decline of the Ottoman Empire.

This vision, however, was not just limited to Arabs. It applied to all of Turkey's other neighbors and was symptomatic of Turks' deep-rooted fear that the country was surrounded by enemies. These fears also reflected Turks' collective psychological "trauma" of having inherited a collapsed empire. Turks were certain that the Greeks wanted to divide Turkey, sought to reverse their losses from the war over Cyprus in 1974, and received substantial support from Europe and America. Relations were also poor with Bulgaria. Turks viewed the Soviet Union, which dominated the north, as ready to devour the country, while the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) threatened it from the East. In addition, Turks worried that the Western powers were waiting to divide the country, as they had done after World War I.

Given all of these potential enemies, we always had to be watchful and alert to new threats. And in many respects, our vigilance was justified. But the constant vigilance also created a political environment in which Turkey's leaders on both the left and the right could postpone addressing national challenges indefinitely and blame any problem on foreign scapegoats. Externalizing the enemy thus had the effect of minimizing inherent structural and political weaknesses and deferring action aimed at improving Turkey's domestic situation.

**Turkish perceptions of its neighbors ... began to change after the collapse of the Soviet Union, fostered by globalization. Various Turkish politicians and leaders of the right, the left, and the center-right parties decided that Turkey needed to shift its foreign policy and to revise the principle that the nation was threatened by all of its neighbors.**

Turkish perceptions of its neighbors, however, began to change after the collapse of the Soviet Union, fostered by globalization. Various Turkish politicians and leaders of the right, the left, and the center-right parties decided that Turkey needed to shift its foreign policy and to revise the principle that the nation was threatened by all of its neighbors. This new vision for Turkish foreign policy embraced globalization and emphasized the role of trade in foreign relations as never before. This vision also sought to harness Turkey's "soft" power to promote new cultural and trade relations, especially with its immediate neighbors. In addition, Turkish leaders aimed to transform their nation into a regional power but not — as some have argued — to revive a neo-Ottoman worldview or the Ottoman Empire. This new framework rejected the fearful mindset of the past and regarded Turkey's neighbors as having the potential to help the country address its pressing domestic problems. Over the last decade, we have seen the benefits of these new approaches, as Turkey's per capita income has increased and its trade with its neighbors has expanded greatly.

Equally importantly, Turks, Arabs, and others in the region have benefited from the passage of time. The events of World War I in particular no longer carry the same ideological and historical significance today as they did for past generations. With this new perspective, people can re-embrace familial and cultural ties that transcend the national borders established in the early 20th century. Especially after visa restrictions were relaxed by Turkey and several Arab countries

in 2009 and 2010, Turkey has become a tourist destination for millions of Syrians, Lebanese, and Jordanians. Arab tourists flock not only to the Turkish cities across the Syrian border, Istanbul, and Mediterranean holiday resorts, but also to the remote highlands of Turkey's eastern Black Sea Coast. Stores that directly appeal to Arab customers have multiplied in Turkey. Turkish soap operas and Turkish singers have found large audiences in the Arab world. In addition, Turkish consumer items are found widely in Arab households. All of these promote Turkey's image as a Westernized, secular, democratic, economically-developed country.

While Turkey's engagement with the Arab world and its neighbors is associated with the rise of the AKP and the ideas of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, we should not lose sight of the fact that Turkey's current engagement with its neighbors dates back to the presidency of Turgut Özal. From 1983 until his death in 1993, Özal built commercial, cultural, and political ties with Turkey's neighbors in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. During the era of coalition governments in the mid- and late-1990s, Turkish Prime Ministers Tansu Çiller and M. Bülent Ecevit worked to increase Turkish ties with the Middle East. Although the Ecevit government (1999–2002) developed warm relations with Israel, it nonetheless denounced Israeli attacks on a Palestinian refugee camp in 2002 as "genocide."

Still, there is little question that Turkey's engagement with the Arab world and the wider Middle East accelerated when the AKP was elected to power in 2002 and especially when Davutoğlu became Turkey's Foreign Minister in 2009. He has won support throughout Turkey for his approach to foreign affairs in the Middle East and Central Asia, a policy approach that he calls the "zero problems with neighbors policy." Even Turks who vigorously oppose the AKP policies domestically hail Davutoğlu's foreign policy as a rousing success. It is likely that future Turkish governments, including those that might be led by the AKP's opponents, will continue to follow this approach. In the long run, Turkey's relations with its Arab and non-Arab neighbors look bright and mutually beneficial.

Nevertheless, as the May 2010 crisis over the Turkish aid flotilla for Gaza reveals, Turkey's embrace of its neighbors entails risks. If Turkish leaders fail to grasp a vision that goes beyond man-made boundaries and permit their emotions to override other considerations, Turkey could find itself even worse off than it was during its most difficult moments in the Cold War. It is worth considering what value an Eastern-oriented policy holds for Turkey, if adopting such an approach leads the country to disregard its two-centuries-old Westernization policy, the core principles of the Republic, and alienates Turkey's strategic partners in the West. While trade with its neighbors has grown, half of Turkey's total trade is with the European Union. Nor has Turkey's engagement with its neighbors erased previous disagreements on territorial borders or the place of Islam in the modern world. Without careful guidance and balance, the "zero problems policy" could become a "problems with all neighbors policy."