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Freedom's Edge

Turkey Tilts Toward Iran

Claudia Rosett, 03.26.10, 12:01 AM EDT

Tea and talk with President Abdullah Gul.



ANKARA--

Drinking tea with the President of Turkey has charms enough so that I wish there were no need to report the disturbing talk that went with it--of Iranian rulers and nuclear bombs.

But the

occasion was a policy interview, not a social call. President Abdullah Gul, with his mustache, swept back hair and a mischievous glint in his eye, recently received a visiting group of Americans, including a handful of reporters, of which I was one. He spoke with us at Turkey's presidential palace, a splendid place of jasmine-scented halls, maritime [oil paintings](#) and a waiting room furnished with cozy armchairs, a sofa of palest gold leather and a big flat-screen TV showing scenes of his recent activities. From there we were seated around a polished wood table, sipping our tea, while Gul sat at the head, speaking through an interpreter (though he speaks English). At the request of our group he focused on two issues: disputes arising from the Armenian genocide of 1915, and policies for dealing with Iran's regime and its nuclear and potentially genocidal ambitions today.

Despite the hospitality, I came away with the uneasy sense that there is trouble brewing in Ankara. A secular, Muslim-majority state, long allied with the West, Turkey in 2002 voted into power an Islamic party, the Justice and Development Party, or AKP. The AKP's leaders have been fashioning a new role for their government--a role embraced by President Barack Obama--in which Turkey behaves less as a firm ally of the West than as a multilateral mediator and regional center of "soft power."

Our visit may well have been intended as a small piece of that effort. The interview with President Gul capped a whirlwind of foreign policy meetings in Ankara late last week arranged by a private Turkish think tank, the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, or TEPAV. (In joining this group, I turned down their offer to pay for airfare and hotels but did accept the

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The Greenest Gasoline?

chance to enjoy access to a number of high-level officials.)

From one government official after another we heard that Turkey's current foreign policy, led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is to seek "zero problems" with its neighbors. But Turkey has some of the world's roughest neighbors, including Iran. Aspiring to zero problems with Iran, while its rulers murder dissidents, threaten democracies and build the bomb, requires compromises that are inevitably at odds with an array of Western interests, including the democratic values that Turkey's AKP trumpets as being part of its program.

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Already Turkey has tilted away from Israel, with which it had solid ties in the 1990s. Today Turkey's AKP leaders talk with everyone but sympathize with the Iranian-backed Palestinian terrorist organization, Hamas, as "brothers." Since early 2009 they have had a series of highly visible spats with Israel. Currently Turkey is also berating the U.S. over congressional calls for Ankara to apologize for the 1915 Armenian genocide. In

early March, Turkey recalled its ambassador to Washington, Namik Tan. He turned up at two of the meetings organized for our group in Ankara, including the interview with the president. Tan is a genial man, but his presence was a pointed reminder that while Turkey is America's ally--a NATO member, sending troops to Afghanistan and hosting U.S. forces at Incirlik Air Base--Turkey's leaders don't mind flaunting their disagreements with Washington.

This matters, not least, because Turkey, long a hapless petitioner to join the [European Union](#), has been campaigning with great success to join or even preside over some of the world's other prominent diplomatic clubs. In 1999 Turkey became a founding member of the Group of 20 industrialized and emerging economies. Since Erdogan took office in 2003, his government has been shunting aside Turkey's secular military, the second-largest standing armed forces in NATO after the U.S. Reaching out on other fronts, Erdogan over the past seven years has made 234 visits to 81 countries on five continents, according to a Turkish pro-government newspaper,

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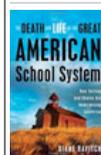
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Today's Zaman. Gul, who served as Erdogan's deputy prime minister and foreign minister before becoming president in 2007, maintains a similar globe-trotting schedule. So does Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, a prime strategist of Turkey's current approach, on which he has written a book titled *Strategic Depth*.

Diplomatically, it's paid off. Since 2005 a Turk has headed the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference--headquartered in [Saudi Arabia](#) and one of the most powerful lobbying blocs in the U.N. In 2009, for the first time in almost four decades, Turkey took one of the 10 rotating seats on the U.N. Security Council. Currently, Turkey also sits on the governing board of the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency (where it abstained last fall from a vote to censure Iran for building a secret uranium enrichment facility near Qom).

With all this, Turkey has become an influential player in diplomatic efforts to corral Iran's nuclear bomb program. But with a "zero problems" approach to Iran, where does that lead?

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Tags: USA, israel, turkey, iran, nuclear bomb

Posted by MagicBlue | 03/27/10 07:41 AM EDT

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Back in 2001, Iran's moderate President Rafsanjani spoke at the annual al-Quds festival and said that "if one day the world of Islam comes to possess nuclear weapons, Israel could be destroyed." He [\[Read More\]](#)

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