

Policy of Zero Problems with the Neighbours

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Cultivating and maintaining good neighbourly relations has always been one of the primary objectives of many governments in Turkey. Parties, governments even the military had posited similar policies under various names such as the “peace belt around Turkey policy”, “good neighbourhood policy” etc., and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) followed suit. The AKP’s party programme as well as its manifesto for the 2002 Elections implied that good neighbourly relations would be one of the priorities of the party’s foreign policy. However, it was a year later when the Prime Minister Erdogan’s Chief Adviser Ahmet Davutoglu articulated the *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* policy in February 2004 as one of the four leading principles of the AKP government’s foreign policy. The name given to this policy suggested that it would eradicate all the problems that Turkey was trying to overcome in its neighbourhood. The policy received widespread attention from the international public that was already scrutinising the foreign affairs of the AKP, the party with Islamist credentials that was able to rise to power a mere 18 months after its foundation. It promised to follow a more “cooperative track” with its neighbouring countries through the development of “economic interdependence”.¹ The steady improvement in relations with Syria and Iran in the first half of the 2000s attested to the policy’s success. *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* was presented and perceived as one of the hallmarks of the party’s foreign policy.

Notwithstanding the facilitating role that the changing security discourse played in defusing tensions between Turkey and some of its neighbours, the policy failed to deliver what it was supposed to do when regional circumstances transpired to be less than conducive to such alignments. Due to the regional dynamics prevailing in the Caucasus, the policy had already failed to produce concrete results in the context of the Armenian opening. The Syrian leg of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* ground to a halt as soon as the contributing factors disappeared. Almost simultaneously, Ankara’s relations with Baghdad began to display signs of deterioration. However, in contrast to what has occurred in the Middle East, the policy still bears fruit in the Balkans and South Europe where the conjuncture seems to be relevant. This article argues that rather than the Arab uprisings, the new strategic configuration that emerged after the US withdrawal from Iraq undermined the basis on which the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* functioned.

Before going into the details regarding *Zero Problems with the Neighbours*, it should be reiterated that similar policies had already been articulated by previous governments before the AKP came to power.² The governments of the late 1990s tried to prioritise trust, dialogue and cooperation with the neighbours. Although under different names, similar policies aimed at improving relations with neighbours precedes the introduction of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours*. Good neighbourhood policies with Russia, Iran, Syria and Bulgaria were already launched and led to the conclusion of various economic and political agreements. Faced with international pressure for its interference in the internal af-

¹ Ahmet DAWUTOGLU, “Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı”, *Radikal* 26 February 2004.

² Nur Bilge CRISS, “Parameters of Turkish Foreign Policy under the AKP”, in Mustafa AYDIN, (ed.) *Turkish Foreign Problems: Old Problems, New Parameters*, Madrid: UNISCI, 2010, p. 32.

fairs of Lebanon, the Assad regime was eager to improve its relations with Ankara and readily reciprocated its overtures. In stark contrast to the constant tension throughout the 1990s, the exchange of high-level visits with Syria was already underway and the military training agreement in July 2002 was signed before the AKP came to power.³ Bilateral relations with Iran were also improving in the early 2000s. In July 2002, much to America's annoyance, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer visited Iran where he received a warm welcome. Sezer became the first Turkish President to visit the Azeri regions of Iran. Ankara's rapprochement with Moscow had gained momentum after the Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's visit to Turkey in December 1997. Following an agreement for the construction of an underwater natural gas pipeline through the Black Sea, dubbed *Blue Stream*, Russia became Turkey's main energy supplier. Economic interdependence in Turkish-Russian relations was in full swing before the AKP came to power. The new mood was articulated by Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz's declaration that Turkey would "cooperate rather than compete with its great neighbour."⁴ Ankara suspended its support for Chechens fighting for independence, and so did Russians with the PKK. Improvement in relations with Ankara's most troublesome neighbour, Greece, was already underway. After Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK's leader was apprehended in the Greek Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, the two neighbours shelved some bilateral issues of mutual concern and established various multi-dimensional dialogue mechanisms such as exploratory talks on the Aegean problems.⁵ Having been conceived by Ahmet Davutoglu, the policy of "*Zero Problems with the Neighbours*" was first articulated in the daily *Radikal* in February 2004.⁶ When Davutoglu elaborated on the concept in January 2008, he underscored that it was one of the five "Principles of Turkey's New Foreign Policy" that governed AKP's foreign policy since it had come

to power. The AKP considerably desecuritized Ankara's foreign policy discourse based on cooperation rather than competition. It was obvious that *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* was in line with the AKP's holistic rhetoric reflecting its ideological propensities to develop cultural and historical ties with Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbours. In his analysis, he highlighted relations with Syria and Georgia branding them "the most striking examples of Turkey's success in the region".⁷ Turkey and Syria signed more than fifty agreements and lifted visa requirements. The "intense economic interdependence" was emphasised as the major mechanism through which Turkey could have cultivated "a substantial trust in its relations with its neighbours," and thus, the "zero problem policy" could have been implemented "without creating any fear of imperial expansion."⁸ Using the Arabic words borrowed in Turkish, he declared that the two neighbours share a "common destiny, common history, and common future." On another occasion he also pointed out that Turkey was applying the EU model towards the Middle East with Syria being the pilot project.⁹ The policy was given further publicity in the aftermath of Davutoglu's appointment as Foreign Minister in May 2009, when three more so called methodological principles were added. The first was a "visionary approach to the issues instead of the 'crisis oriented' attitude that dominated foreign policy during the entire Cold War period." The second principle aimed to base Turkish foreign policy on a "consistent and systematic framework around the world." The last methodological principle was the adoption of a new discourse and diplomatic style relying on Turkey's soft power in the region. In addition to the methodological principles, there were five operational principles guiding Turkey's foreign policy-making process. They were the *balance between security and democracy, zero problems with the neighbours, proactive and pre-emptive peace diplo-*

³ Serkan DEMİRTAS, "Ortadoğu'da Yeni Süreç," *Cumhuriyet*, 21 June 2002.

⁴ Gencer ÖZCAN, "Turkey's Changing Neighbourhood Policy," *Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, 35 (2004), p. 1-15.

⁵ In the wake of Greek Foreign Minister Yorgo Papandreu's visit to Ankara in January 2000, which was the first of its kind for 38 years, major newspapers declared that the relations went into another historical era. Metehan DEMİR and Ugur ERGAN, "Atina ile Tarihi Dönem", *Hürriyet*, 21 January 2000; "Atina'yla Yeni Dönem", *Cumhuriyet*, 21 January 2000.

⁶ Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, "Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı", *Radikal*, 26 February 2004. Even then known to be the architect of new Turkish foreign policy, Davutoglu was serving as chief adviser to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In Ahmet Davutoglu's *opus magnum*, *Stratejik Derinlik [Strategic Depth]*, there is no literal reference to the policy. *Stratejik Derinlik*, Istanbul: Küre, 2001.

⁷ Bülent ARAS and Rabia Karakaya POLAT, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran", *Security Dialogue* (2008) 39:5, p. 495.

⁸ Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey*, 10: 1 (2008) The essay is based on the transcript of a CNN Türk program with Prof. Davutoglu on 2 January 2008, p. 80.

⁹ Emre ÇALIŞKAN, "Türkiye AB Modelini Ortadoğu'da Uyguluyor", *Radikal*, 3 January 2010.

macy, multi-dimensional foreign policy, and rhythmic diplomacy.¹⁰

The *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* policy was hailed as the leading principle of Turkey's foreign policy by the AKP until as late as April 2011. For the approaching June 2011 elections, the party's manifesto gave plaudits to the principle as one of the major achievements that the party fulfilled: "We made friends, not enemies. We fulfilled Mustafa Kemal's motto "Peace at home, peace abroad," which used to be so far from the reality and turned Turkey into a country which makes friends, not enemies. We attached as much importance to peace abroad as we did to peace at home. While our country's foreign policy used to be run on the basis of the assumption that Turkey is surrounded by enemies, we turned this imagination and psychology into the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours*. We solved problems that were thought to be insoluble, formed friendships people thought could not be formed."¹¹

A close examination of the domestic political circumstances under which the first AKP government had to function reveals that the *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* Policy was first and foremost geared towards contributing to the demilitarisation of the political regime as well as to the desecuritisation of the dominant political discourse. When it came to power in 2002, in order to consolidate its position *vis-à-vis* the military, the AKP had to demilitarise the foreign and security policy-making process. In order to facilitate this transformation, while the EU reforms for democratisation were given full support, the AKP deliberately avoided any policy options with a potential to trigger a military escalation with the neighbours. Furthermore, the policy was in line with the European Union's neighbourhood policy. In the meantime, the AKP governments felt it necessary to avoid any conflict with its neighbours because such a contingency might delay Turkey's accession on the grounds that its neighbourhood was still perilous.¹² With EU accession in mind, as an expert observed, Turkey wanted to treat its Middle Eastern neighbours

a la Europe.¹³ Under such domestic circumstances, the *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* Policy became one of the key components of the new policy orientation.

However, beyond the domestic political context, the international conjecture was also conducive to the successful implementation of the policy.¹⁴ The regional power configuration set by the US invasion of Iraq created the necessary conditions for the successful implementation of the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours*. The invasion that brought a US military presence next to Iran and Syria had made Turkey's good neighbourliness more valuable in the eyes of the two neighbouring countries. In fact, for fear of being the next US target, both countries were already making many good will gestures to win hearts and minds in Ankara.¹⁵ Both Syria and Iran began to display more constructive attitudes towards Turkey's demands. For example, it was only with a US invasion looming overhead that Iranian authorities discontinued their support for the PKK and started to cooperate with Ankara within the framework of the Turkey-Iran High Security Commission, which had been established in 1998, yet remained dysfunctional. When the PEJAK, the Kurdish separatist organisation with close organisational ties to the PKK, began to operate in Iran, the Turkey-Iran High Security Commission met regularly leading to the conclusion of a security cooperation agreement in 2004 in which Iran eventually agreed to brand the PKK a terrorist organisation. On the Syrian side, Damascus also welcomed the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours*. The rapprochement with Syria gained further momentum when the US occupation became imminent. After the al Qaeda bombings in Istanbul in November 2004, it became evident that Turkish-Syrian security cooperation encompassed issues other than fighting the PKK. In January 2005, President Bashar Assad became the first Syrian President to visit Turkey since Syria gained independence in 1946.¹⁶ In the wake of the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in

¹⁰ Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2010, www.setav.org/ups/dosya/34134.pdf, [Accessed on 19 March 2012].

¹¹ See AKP's official website prepared in April 2011 by the party's Propoganda and Media Head Office at: www.akparti.org.tr/site/icraat/215/komsularla-sifir-problem [Accessed 19 March 2012].

¹² Ahmet DAVUDOĞLU, "Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı," *Radikal* 26 February 2004.

¹³ Soner ÇAGAPTAY "A Turkish Rapprochement with Middle East Rogue States?," Analysis of Near East Policy From The Scholars and Associates of the Washington Institute, *Policywatch* No. 825 9 January 2004.

¹⁴ Soli ÖZEL, "Reshuffling the Cards: Turkey, Israel, and the United States in the Middle East", in William Quandt, ed., *Troubled Triangle: The United States, Turkey, and Israel in the New Middle East*, Virginia: Just World Books, 2011, p.51

¹⁵ Seymour HERSH, "The Coming Wars: What the Pentagon Can Now Do in Secret", *The New Yorker*, 24 January 2005.

February 2005, Assad used the rapprochement to break free of the international isolation over Syria's alleged involvement, and Turkey helped to get Assad off the hook.

The major mechanism for the policy was economic cooperation and interdependence. For its implementation, the AKP governments instigated official contacts with neighbouring countries at all levels and devised various frames of cooperation to increase mutual trade with them. To this end, their neighbours' visa requirements were lifted or liberalised. In order to complement the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours*, the AKP governments attached special importance to softening the official foreign policy discourse. The discourse used in official documents such as the National Security Document was desecuritized by cleansing all clauses which implied animosity towards the neighbours.¹⁷ The change of discourse was palpable in the language used in the context of Turkish-Greek relations. In the Cyprus issue, the changing rhetoric was striking. The first AKP government made it clear that they would seek to reach a political solution in Cyprus. Despite the high political risks involved, Prime Minister Erdogan supported the United Nation's Comprehensive Settlement Plan known as the *Annan Plan* and encouraged Turkish Cypriots to endorse it.¹⁸ Turkey steadily improved its relations with Bulgaria, and, in the aftermath of the latter's membership to NATO, the former opponents of the Cold War became allies. The AKP governments attached a great deal of importance to maintaining good neighbourly relations with Russia. A special body, the High Level Cooperation Council was established and bilateral relations attained the level of "enhanced multi-dimensional partnership." Ankara pursued active policies with a view to resolving regional problems in the Caucasus through peaceful means and by promoting regional cooperation. In order to create an environment of dialogue and trust in the region, Ankara proposed the "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform." Ankara preserved its good relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. However, despite arduous efforts, the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* failed to produce concrete results in Ankara's relations with Yerevan. The two pro-

ocols, aimed at removing the obstacles to building good neighbourly relations with Armenia, were not endorsed by the parliaments.¹⁹ It was once again evident that without the Russian endorsement, such initiatives were doomed to fail.

The AKP governments paid special attention to bolstering relations with Tehran. The relations encompassed intensive political consultations on sensitive issues including Iran's nuclear programme, the increasing volume of bilateral trade and building natural gas pipelines, which turned Turkey into a sort of energy hub in the Eastern Mediterranean. After reaching unprecedented levels, the trade volume was perceived as one of the most successful outcomes of the *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* policy. However, while Ankara's rapprochement with Iran initially complicated its relations with its Western allies, its consent to host anti-ballistic missile radars in eastern Turkey provoked a reaction within the Iranian security establishment, which regarded the decision as a token of hostility. In addition to the new power configuration that emerged in the wake of the US withdrawal from Iraq, the radar issue and the way Turkey deals with the crisis in Syria loom large in the foreseeable future of the *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* policy.

Even before they come to power, the AKP got entangled with a wide range of problems emanating from Iraq. The AKP governments tried to cultivate friendly relations with all political actors operating in Iraq, first and foremost with the Iraqi Kurds. Due to the internal power struggle, the first AKP governments were unable to deal with the problems of northern Iraq. Only after the 2005 elections in Iraqi Kurdistan did it become clear that the official policy initiated by the military had collapsed. The AKP government recognised and improved its relations with the regional government of Kurdistan in Iraq. However, the changing landscape seen in the wake of the US withdrawal from Iraq seems to undermine the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours*, at least in the context of Iraq.

It was extremely ironic that despite Davutoglu branding Syria and Georgia as the "most striking examples" of Turkey's *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* policy, it was in these countries where the policy did

¹⁶ Ömer TASPINAR, "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism", Washington, DC: *Carnegie Papers*, 10 (September 2010) p. 24. downloaded from www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs.

¹⁷ Aslı AYDINTAŞBAŞ, "Kırmızı Kitapta Tehdit Temizliği", *Milliyet*, 23 August 2010.

¹⁸ The Annan Plan could not be put in effect because the Greek Cypriots rejected it.

¹⁹ "The Davutoglu Effect: All Change for Foreign Policy", *The Economist*, 21 October 2010.

not live up to expectations.²⁰ Turkey could do nothing, but stand by and watch when Russian troops wreaked havoc in Georgia. In the case of Syria, in spite of the rhetoric of brotherhood between the two leaders, Ankara was unable to elicit a constructive response from the Assad regime with regard to changing its attitude towards the insurgents. In a matter of weeks the AKP government abandoned what it hoped to secure in Syria after almost a decade of zero problem policy with the Assad regime. The domestic and regional contexts played a decisive role in the sustainability and initial success of the *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* policy. While the domestic imperatives led the AKP governments to desecuritize Turkey's foreign affairs, regional context was also conducive to maintaining such a policy. To begin with, it was evident that the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* was in line with the AKP's holistic rhetoric reflecting its ideological propensities to develop cultural and historical ties with Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbours. Like the EU reforms that demilitarised foreign and security policy-making, the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* helped the AKP to consolidate its position vis-à-vis the military. Similar to the domestic context, the regional context also helped to bolster the policy of *Zero Problems with the Neighbours*. The invasion of Iraq that brought the US military right next to Iran and Syria made Turkey's cooperation more valuable. Therefore, for a comprehensive analysis of the policy, one should take into account the external economies that arose as a result of the US invasion.

The policy should also be evaluated as a concept. *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* created a number of illusions. The first was the way in which the principle was shown to be a deliberate policy initiated and successfully executed by the AKP governments in a way that no other party had been able to do before. This illusion led many to overlook the fact that similar policies had been followed by previous governments only under different names. The other

illusion was that *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* proved to be successful thanks to the AKP's determination to improve relations with the neighbours, which had not been a central issue for previous governments. With this in mind, one can easily ignore the structural catalysts that provided the necessary conditions for the fulfilment of the policy.

It is also worth looking at the name chosen for the policy: *Zero Problems with the Neighbours*. The degree of certainty that the word *zero* alluded to left one with the impression that the party had invented a technically perfect – or as an observer noted, “algebraic” – solution to political problems that other governments had failed to produce.²¹ This also attributes a divine omnipotence to the concept's creator. The word *zero* also has the more subtle connotation that the policy promises a politically trouble-free end result. Together with the aforementioned allusions, the wording evokes a heavenly world where citizens have no cause for complaint. The other word worth analysing is *problem*. Together with *zero*, the word *problem* suggests that *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* offers clear-cut solutions to complex problems.

As a long-term strategy, the policy was good for promoting peaceful bilateral relations. However, the strategy failed for two reasons: the new balance of power in Baghdad in the wake of the US disengagement from Iraq put a proverbial spanner in the strategy. Relatively speaking, the US withdrawal has strengthened Iran's overall position in the Gulf area. The new power configuration in Baghdad also meant Syria's emancipation from the pressure that was emanating from the US military presence in Iraq. This has made both Iran and Syria less receptive and more reactive to Turkish policies, which has been seen in the occasional threats from Tehran following Ankara's decision to join NATO's anti-ballistic missile systems. It is more plausible, therefore, to argue that *Zero Problems with the Neighbours* as a long-term strategy could only pay dividends if regional circumstances remained favourable.

²⁰ Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, “Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”, *Insight Turkey*, 10: 1 (2008) The essay is based on the transcript of a CNN Turk program with Prof. Davutoğlu on 2 January 2008, p. 80.

²¹ Taha ÖZHAN, “Zero Problems and Problems”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 24 November 2011. Özhan argued that “they fail to understand that considering the “zero problems policy” as an algebraic argument is as absurd as declaring the end of “history and politics.” “Zero problems” is an “expectation” for reaching an idealized goal while negative and positive foreign policy relations – which tend to change from time to time – are the dynamic steps to be taken toward reaching this goal.”