

PERSPECTIVE



Turkey alters its compass

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Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan (front C) waits for the start of a meeting as he is accompanied by MPs and officials from his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) at the Turkish parliament in Ankara, January 26, 2010.

(Reuters photo)

Likewise, Ankara currently enjoys good relations with Tehran. Earlier this month, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki held talks in Ankara with Prime Minister Erdogan involving the transportation of Iranian natural gas to Europe via Turkey, establishing a joint refinery, jointly constructing industrial centers and increasing bilateral trade from \$10 billion annually to \$30 billion. The Turkish minister of state said Turkey is keen to begin a "golden age" in Turkish-Iranian ties. While Turkey is against nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, it backs Iran's right to nuclear energy and does not support anti-Iranian sanctions.

But there the love fest ends. Ankara's relations with some of its traditional allies are strained to say the least.

Its important strategic alliance with Washington, which culminated in America's Incirlik Air base was shaken when the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003. Turkey was against the Iraq war from the get-go and blames it for strengthening Kurdish secessionist ambitions. And when, in 2007, the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs passed a resolution in favor of Armenia's stance on the alleged "genocide," Turkey temporarily withdrew its ambassador from Washington.

However, for its part, the U.S. government tends to tread softly with Turkey in light of its NATO role as a strong eastern bulwark and its hosting of Incirlik which was a crucial asset during the Cold War and the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Turkey's importance to Washington was reflected by President Barack Obama's official visit, last April -- criticized within some U.S. circles as blessing a country embarked on establishing a powerful Islamic bloc contrary to American interests. The U.S. has also fervently backed Turkey's efforts to join the EU, which has been somewhat of an annoyance to European countries that are vehemently opposed.

Indeed, hopes of Turkey's EU membership are fast fading. With some reluctance, the 27-member union began talks on Turkey's eventual entry in 2005 but despite Turkey's compliance with entrance requirements, such as a ban on capital punishment, it is still being criticized on its failure to reach an accord on the divided island of Cyprus. The latter accusation is unfounded when it was a Greek-Cypriot ballot that stymied progress.

The Turkish government believes France and Germany, in particular, are erecting obstacles where none exist. Both of these "old European" countries have been open in their opposition to Turkish accession, preferring a "privileged partnership." French President Nicolas Sarkozy is fiercely opposed. In 2007, he said this: "I do not think Turkey has a place in Europe"; its place is in "Asia Minor." And, last year, Sarkozy warned Obama to stay out of Europe's business when it comes to Turkey's EU bid. It's little wonder, therefore, that Ankara is hedging its bets by cultivating other alliances even while it's officially sticking to the EU program.

But the relationship that is most in jeopardy is with Israel, which goes back to 1948 when Turkey was the first predominantly Muslim country to recognize Israel. Since, Turkey and Israel have benefited from military cooperation in terms of arms sales, joint maneuvers, and pilot exchanges. They also enjoy trade relations and have signed a "Turkish-Israeli Free Trade Agreement." That warmth has now been replaced by a distinct chill for various reasons.

In the first instance, Erdogan has loudly condemned Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza to the extent of walking off a stage at the World Economic Forum in Davos last year after angrily sparring over the issue with Israeli President Shimon Peres. The Turkish PM has referred to Israel's attack as "disproportionate" and "a crime against humanity."

Then, last month, Israel's discourteous treatment of Turkish Ambassador Ahmet Oguz Celikkol -- called to answer Israeli criticisms of a Turkish television series that painted Israelis in a negative light -- caused a diplomatic incident. This was sparked by Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon who ordered the removal of the Turkish flag during a joint press conference and told Israeli journalists to take note that the Turkish diplomat was seated on a low sofa while the Israeli officials had been given much higher chairs.

Erdogan was quick to warn Israel that its deliberate humiliation of its diplomat threatened bilateral cooperation. "Losing a friend like Turkey in the future should be an issue to which Israel should give some thought..." he said. The tense situation was calmed by an apology from Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Turkish government is currently walking a tight-rope over the Bosphorus between the east and the west but in the event it decides to take a giant leap toward the Orient, Israel and its European allies will have only themselves to blame. Their loss will undoubtedly be this region's gain.

(Source: Arab News)

Ripples of Dubai killing spread across region

DUBAI (CNN) — A prominent Islamic resistance figure murdered in his Dubai hotel room by a hit squad that the police say operated with European passports. It sounds like the plot of a John Le Carré spy novel, but this is reality and the hunt is on for the killers of top Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh.

Retracing his footsteps, here's the picture that emerges: al-Mabhouh landed at Dubai International airport on the afternoon of January 19. Then, a short drive to his hotel, the al Bustan Rotana, where just hours later he would be killed.

Dubai police say he was not traveling under his real name, so the hotel staff would have been unaware he was one of the founding members of Hamas' military wing.

According to family members, he booked a room on the first floor, making sure there was no balcony and that the windows were sealed so no one could enter.

His brother in Gaza tells CNN he never ate or drank in a hotel or on a plane as he knew he was a target. Dubai police say he then left the hotel, returning around 9:30 p.m. They want to know where he was during that time and, crucially, who he met.

Dubai police refused to talk to CNN, but they told al-Mabhouh's family there were signs of five or six electric shocks on his legs, behind his ears, on his genitals and heart. Blood on a pillow led police to believe he was suffocated.

Lt. Gen. Dahi Khalfan, Dubai's chief of police, has told local media they are looking for a professional gang, many of whom held European passports.

It's believed they left the country even before al-Mabhouh's body was discovered. Dubai police are working closely



A Palestinian supporter of Hamas holds a picture of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, a senior Hamas military commander, during his funeral at al-Yarmouk camp near Damascus, January 29, 2010.

(Reuters photo)

with Interpol to track the killers and have publicly voiced surprise that such a figure within Hamas was traveling without his own security.

At al-Mabhouh's funeral in Damascus, Syria, where he spent the last years of his life, few doubted Israel was behind the assassination.

At his family home in Gaza there is the same conviction that Israel's intelligence unit, Mossad, was responsible.

His brother Farq al-Mabhouh said: "If you know the purpose of his visit to Dubai then you know the result of 90 percent of the investigation. Some in Hamas say Dubai was a stop off for a third country he was traveling to."

The brother also claims al-Mabhouh ran a textile company, in addition to his Hamas duties, and that he may have been in Dubai for that reason.

Al-Mabhouh's father, Abed al-Rauf, told CNN: "There was an attempt to kill him in Lebanon and he survived, two other attempts in Syria and he survived. Israel has been after him for the past 22 years."

His mother, Fatima agreed, saying she has been expecting him to be assassinated for years.

Dubai police have said Mossad could be behind this killing on their territory and has warned Mossad to stay away.

Israel's policy of war and occupation blocks negotiations

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Mashaal, however, praised Moscow's position to promote his group's stance in relations with Israel. "It's enough that Moscow tells the world that Hamas is a movement of freedom fighters, not a terrorist group," he told journalists.

Russia has repeatedly called for an end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip that was imposed by Israel.

Russia is part of the so-called Quartet of Mideast peace brokers that also includes the United States, the European Union and the United Nations. The Quartet's principles include recognition of Israel, a renunciation of violence, and adherence to previous Palestinian agreements.

Mashaal said that during his talks with Russian officials he did not discuss plans to include Hamas in a peace conference.

He said the visit was his third trip to Moscow since 2006, and he expressed hope that Moscow's mediation will boost the renewal of peace talks.

Mashaal, however, downplayed Moscow's political role in the talks.

"We appreciate any role that Russia and other countries could play in the Mideast peace process, but only Egypt has the real capability to settle the problem," he said.

Cairo has been trying to broker a deal to reconcile Hamas and Abbas' Fatah movement and push them toward a power-sharing agreement.

Sri Lanka's president dissolves parliament

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Gen. Fonseka last year led government troops in their crushing defeat of Tamil Tiger rebels. Some analysts said the arrest, which comes ahead of parliamentary elections, appears to have been aimed at preventing Fonseka from participating as planned.

Fonseka's wife Anoma Fonseka said the former army chief has been cut off from family and friends and is being held at a secret location, though the government denied that.

The government has accused Fonseka of trying to topple the government and kill the president. Fonseka has denied these charges.

After announcing Monday that Fonseka would face a court martial on sedition charges, the government heaped more accusations on him. A statement Tuesday said the former army chief's reported call for anyone who committed war crimes during the conflict to be prosecuted showed he was "hell-bent on betraying the gallant armed forces of Sri Lanka."

More than 7,000 civilians were killed in the final months of the fighting that crushed the rebels last spring. Human rights groups have accused the military, which was led by Fonseka at the time, of shelling hospitals and heavily populated civilian areas during the fighting, and the rebels of holding the local population as human shields. One-time allies, Fonseka and President Mahinda Rajapaksa were both considered heroes by Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority for crushing the Tigers. However, their relationship deteriorated after hostilities ended.

India, Turkey discuss bilateral issues

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Dr. Singh in this context referred to the Joint Study Group for a Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement that held its first meeting in New Delhi in January 2010.

Hailing the increased participation of Turkish companies in infrastructural projects in India, Dr. Singh called for expanding cooperation in areas such as science and technology, culture, education and tourism.

While President Abdullah Gul on this occasion said that the two countries were rediscovering each other and that the frequent high-level exchanges, including his own visit, was a reflection of the political will to work closely with India on political, economic, science and technology and cultural fronts.

President Gul underlined that the special relationship between Turkey and Pakistan did not, in any way, create obstructions for Turkey-India relations, which Turkey intends to carry forward.

The two sides discussed recent developments relating to Afghanistan.

President Gul recognized that India's contribution to Afghanistan is very important and expressed the desire to work together with India in bringing stability to that country.

Gul wished to avoid any misunderstanding relating to a recent meeting in Istanbul on Afghanistan, which emerged from a trilateral format involving Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey.

He said that Turkey would have liked India to be there and hoped that India would be able to participate in yet another meeting relating to developments in Afghanistan that would be hosted in Turkey later this year.

During detailed discussions on enhancing cooperation in different areas, the two sides agreed on a Joint Declaration on Terrorism and a Joint Declaration on Science and Technology Cooperation.

Both sides also agreed to continue to work together in G-20 and other international fora including the United Nations.

Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh was assisted by Minister of External Affairs S.M. Krishna, Minister of Road, Surface Transport and Highways Kamal Nath, Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas Murlidhar Deora, Minister of Commerce and Industry Anand Sharma, Minister of State for Defence P. V. Narayana Murthy and the Principal Secretary to PM, T.K.A. Nair, National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon, and other senior officials.

Turkish President Abdullah Gul, accompanied by wife Hayrunnisa Gul, is on a State visit to India from 7th to 11th February, 2010.

Members of his delegation include Mehmet Aydin, State Minister and co-Chairman of the Joint Economic Commission, Prof. Dr. Recep Akdag, Minister of Health and Binali Yildirim, Minister of Transportation, Members of Parliament, senior Government officials and over a hundred business persons.

Turkish FM visits Tehran for nuclear talks: report

Tehran Times Political Desk



TEHRAN — Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was scheduled to arrive in Tehran Tuesday evening to meet top Iranian officials including Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki.

Turkey's semi-official Anatolia news agency reported on Tuesday that Davutoglu is expected to pay a visit to Iran "for nuclear talks".

Speaking at a press conference following his talks with Thorbjorn Jagland, secretary general of the Council of Europe (COE), Davutoglu said he would go to Iran after Tehran announced it started enriching uranium to 20 percent on Tuesday.

Meantime, the Turkish minister said that he was not pessimistic about the issue (enrichment), believing that there was still a common ground.



Over 60 feared dead in Afghan avalanches

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Rescue workers pulled frozen corpses out of cars.

"I saw five dead bodies from a car parked behind us, and so far the government has not done enough to save our lives," Qazi Azhar, an Afghan judge who was caught in the pass, told Reuters by mobile phone.

Another passenger, Ghulam Yahya, said passengers trapped inside the tunnel were suffocating from exhaust fumes. "Many others will die if we don't get help on time," he said.

Heavy snowfall and rain also caused floods in the south of the country. Zalmay Ayoubi, spokesman for the governor of southern Kandahar Province, said six people had been killed and 10 were missing as a result of floods there.

Saudi forces raid Yemen's northern villages

Saudi air strikes continue to target northern Yemen as the Sana'a government says it would reconsider ceasefire with the fighters should they comply with its demands.

The Houthi fighters said Tuesday that Saudi warplanes carried out almost a dozen air raids in northern villages.

According to the resistance fighters, Saudi forces fired dozens of rockets and artillery shells from the border region of Al-Jabir, which was returned to Riyadh after the fighters initiated a ceasefire with the Kingdom two weeks ago.

Riyadh, however, continued its offensives alongside with the Yemeni government, which also rejected the Houthi's peace offer, highlighting their sixth condition for a Houthi pledge not to attack Saudi Arabia.

Yemen's five conditions for a ceasefire included removing checkpoints, ending banditry, handing over all military equipment and weapons, and releasing civilians and military personnel.