



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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**“Turkey and Iran: Assessing the New Regional Diplomacy”  
The Brookings Institution  
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
June 15, 2010, 3:30 PM – 5:00 PM**

The Brookings Institution held a conference on Turkey-Iran relations and their implications for U.S. policy in the Middle East. The panel of experts included journalist and author **Stephen Kinzer**, who has a new book published on this particular issue called *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future*; **Suzanne Maloney**, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution; and **Ömer Taspınar**, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

In his opening statement, **Stephen Kinzer** addressed the reform movement in Iran. He described the Iranians as one of the most pro-American people in the world and stressed that the United States must utilize this very important asset. Despite the reform movement's efforts to achieve democratic progress in Iran, “repression usually works,” Kinzer explained, adding that the U.S. must face reality as it is. He recommended that the U.S. administration negotiate with the current state of Iran, rather than try to deal with an imaginative world that Americans wish is reality. In his view, the U.S. has unfortunately not been able to adapt its strategies to meet the rapid changes occurring around the globe. According to Kinzer, American Middle East policy has revolved around the interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia, but “those days are over now,” and **we cannot deal with the future through the lens of the past, he asserted, while encouraging the U.S. to “re-imagine the Middle East and our role in it.”**

In his longer assessment of U.S.-Iran relations, Kinzer argued that the United States never made a serious offer to negotiate with Iran and that the current offer for negotiations over the nuclear program is not a realistic approach since all that the Iranians are getting in these negotiations is the reward of negotiating. Instead, **Kinzer proposed offering Iran a grand bargain in which all concerns are open for talks, including Iran's own agenda.** Observing Iran closely, Kinzer reassured the attendees that Iran has one of the most vibrant democratic societies in the Middle East, with values that are very similar to our own, and it is only sane to negotiate with the regime as it is – despite its difficulties. Additionally, he suggested that **Iran has many of the same regional strategic interests as the United States, including the state of affairs in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Al-Qaeda, and it exercises a similarly immense political and ideological influence, thus playing a vital role in future regional developments.**

Regarding Turkey's relationship to the U.S., Kinzer noted that Turkey is still a major NATO ally and a decisive actor in the Middle East as its economy is becoming stronger. Nevertheless, there is a “broader disconnect between the two,” he said, arguing that Turkey is anticipating a new world while the U.S. is still holding on to the old era in which the United States is the only dominant power. **While the Turks are trying to help the United States with its interests in the region, the U.S. refuses to receive any advice on the Middle East,** according to Kinzer.

The prospects for Turkey's influence in the Middle East may be stronger if it is not in lockstep with Washington, as it could also lure other states to its corner. However, **Turkey must ease down on its rhetoric towards Israel, Kinzer proclaims, describing the Israeli-Turkish relationship as imperative to Middle East peace plan, and arguing that normalizing the rhetoric between the two would only serve Turkey's security interests.** Kinzer mentioned that while the opportunities for better engagement are out there, he is not optimistic that the U.S. will take the necessary measures. However, he finished with an encouraging quote from the Persian poet Rumi, **"why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?"**

**Suzanne Maloney rejected the idea of a grand bargain with Iran,** arguing that such a measure is impossible to achieve due to Iran's mistrust of the United States. She argued that in the aftermath of last year's presidential elections, the United States was subjected to unpredictable behavior on the part of the Iranian regime. Also, as the Iranian political establishment was in disarray, it became difficult for Iran to respond to American proposals. According to Maloney, Iranians saw the events of last year as an American fueled conspiracy and therefore rejected any offers from the Obama administration to sit down and talk.

Regarding sanctions, Maloney explained that it has become a default diplomatic approach by the United States government. Even though the European Union has supported these new sanctions on Iran, **"it will not bring about the desired result ... We have a lot of experience with sanctions, but so do the Iranians" and they have learned how to undermine international pressure with their solid oil revenues.** This makes it difficult for the United States to rest on the same strategies while expecting different results. Maloney's recommendation to the U.S. administration was to **engage with Iran whenever and wherever possible, including effort to exploit opportunities with the trilateral agreement. Low-level talks in low-level scale are preferred in this situation,** she said.

**Ömer Taspınar** focused on Turkey's regional role, introduced by his presentation of **two different narratives in Turkish society:** First, **the Islamization of Turkish foreign policy,** and second, **the criticism of American foreign policy** which argues that Turkey and Brazil should play a more positive role in the region. Taspınar cautioned that the concept of the Islamization of Turkey is often a caricature. **Instead it is important to view Turkey and its role to the outside world from its own perception as an independent, self-confident state with the 16th largest economy in the world.** According to Taspınar, two political ideologies coexist in modern day Turkey; the neo-Ottoman ideology that pursues a role as a bridge between east and west, and the neo-nationalist ideology that is simply doing anything in its power to reject any form subjugation of foreign powers. **Taspınar highlighted three key issues that the U.S. administration should focus on regarding Turkey: the animosity between Turks and the Kurds, the Armenian genocide, and the Turkish pursuit to integrate into the European Union.**

In Kinzer's closing statement he said that Saudi Arabia and the U.S. are too intimate and it is not good for either party. The Arab world is the only part of the world that has not yet seen the democratization train and Americans fear that loosening relations with Arabia will produce Islamism. But **"we need to let Arabia be Arabia," he said, adding that the Arab world would benefit from less supervision from America.** He encouraged Turkey to avoid acting on emotion and short-term interests. **The situation in the Middle East, bleak as it may be, is not hopeless, Kinzer said, but America must re-conceive its political presence in the world.**