

Turkey 'still seeks EU entry'

President denies turning from the West

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Turkey has hit back at accusations that it is turning its back on the West in favour of closer ties with the Islamic world, insisting that membership of the EU is its key foreign policy goal.

"There is no reason to have any doubts about Turkey," Abdullah Gül, the President, declared in a forceful

interview with *The Times* designed to allay alarm in Europe and America about its increasingly close relations with radical Middle East regimes.

Turkey was not "lost", he said, denouncing such claims as "unacceptable" and emphasising that Turkey was also forging ties far beyond the Arab world. "I consider it very wrong to interpret Turkey's interests with other geographic regions as it breaking from

the West, turning its back on the West or seeking alternatives to the West. Turkey is part of Europe."

Mr Gül argued that the US and Europe should welcome its growing engagement in the Middle East because it was promoting Western values in a region largely governed by authoritarian regimes. Rebuking some Western politicians for their outdated views of Turkey, he insisted that the country

had undergone a "silent revolution". It was now a big economic power that had embraced democracy, human rights and the free market. It had become a "source of inspiration" in the region. "If this is not acknowledged, it's a pity," Mr Gül lamented.

Turkey is a strategically vital country of 72 million people that straddles the border of Europe and Asia, has Nato's Continued on page 4

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second-largest army and is a supply hub for US war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has also caused consternation in Western capitals in recent months. Not only has it welcomed President Ahmadinejad of Iran and congratulated him on his stolen election victory, it also voted against UN sanctions to try to halt the Iranian nuclear programme.

The nation has lent support to Hamas, which is on the US and EU lists of terrorist organisations. "We are respecting the choice of the Palestinian people in Gaza," Mr Gül said. It was preparing to host President al-Bashir of Sudan, who is wanted for crimes against humanity, at an Islamic conference until the EU objected. It has assiduously courted Syria, with whom it nearly went to war in 1998.

At the same time, Turkey has condemned Israel, formerly its closest regional ally and supplier of much of its military hardware, over its invasion of Gaza and the recent killing of nine Turkish civilians on a Gaza-bound flotilla by Israeli commandos. Apart from one secret ministerial meeting this week, relations are frozen, with Turkey demanding an apology and compensation. Mr Gül insisted that Turkey had always been Israel's friend but asked: "If an army of a state kills your people in international waters, how would you react?"

From America, particularly, there have been clear signs of displeasure and mutterings about how the ruling AK Party is returning to its Islamic roots. President Obama had a frosty meeting with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Prime Minister, at last weekend's G20 summit. "We think Turkey remains committed to Nato, Europe and the US, but that needs to be demonstrated," Philip Gordon, the Administration's top European diplomat, said.

Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times* columnist, expressed shock at finding "Turkey's Islamic Government seemingly focused not on joining the EU, but the Arab League — no, scratch that, on joining the Hamas-Hezbollah-Iran resistance front against Israel."

Mr Gül admitted that there was "a gap between perception and reality and it needs some clarification". Speaking in his summer residence overlooking the Bosphorus, he described a country that has Europe's fastest — and almost only — expanding economy, with 11 per cent growth in the first quarter of this year alone and the continent's most stable financial system. Turkey's growing economic strength was matched by an increasingly ambitious and independent foreign policy — one driven by trade and based on engagement, not confrontation. "We used to implement other people's programmes," he noted.

Iran, with whom Turkey enjoys



President Gül rebuked Western politicians over outdated views of Turkey, which had undergone a silent revolution

Man in the middle

Born October 29, 1950

Education Studied Economics at Istanbul University. Completed postgraduate studies at the University of Exeter

Family Married to his first cousin, Hayrünisa Gül. She

has been criticised by secularists for wearing a headscarf. They have three children

Honours Appointed Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath in 2008. Won the 2010 Chatham House Prize for Statesman of the Year

Career Elected to Parliament for the first time as a member of the Islamist Welfare Party, after playing an important role in student politics. After Welfare was banned in 1998 he helped to found the Justice and Development Party, becoming Prime Minister in

2002. He stepped aside the following year to allow Recep Tayyip Erdogan to become leader and took charge of the EU accession talks. Elected President in 2007, becoming the first former Islamist to lead the Turkish Republic

Source: Times database

blossoming trade and from whom it imports a third of its gas, was a case in point, he said. Mr Gül said Turkey did not believe that sanctions would stop Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons and feared that they would lead to another disastrous war like that in Iraq. As a neighbour it stood to lose most, so it had combined with Brazil to broker a confidence-building agreement with Iran on exchanging uranium.

"We thought it would be appreciated," Mr Gül said. When the US and its European allies pressed ahead with UN sanctions anyway, "we were surprised". In the end Turkey voted against the sanctions to keep its own deal on the table. In many ways Turkey's growing activism in its own backyard has served it well. Its trade with the Middle East has jumped from \$1.9 billion in 1991 to more than \$23 billion last year. Trade with Iran alone has risen more than 500 per cent since 2002, with about 75,000 lorries a year crossing their mutual border.

Turkey's standing in the region has soared, with Mr Erdogan lauded in the proverbial Arab street for standing up to Israel. Turkish TV is now watched across the Middle East, and relaxed visa restrictions mean that Arabs are flocking to Turkey. Mr Gül argued that the West should welcome this engagement, saying that millions of Arabs were comparing Turkey's success with their own countries. "Our friends in the West should appreciate that Turkey is indirectly spreading all these values in our neighbourhood," he said.

The President's colleagues also argue that Turkey's engagement allows it to act as mediator and messenger in an area generally hostile to the West, and counters Iranian influence. Mr Gül said that Turkey's relationship with Syria helped to achieve stability in Lebanon. Other officials cited Turkey's efforts to mediate between Israel and Syria, and reconcile Iraq's Sunnis and Shias. Turkey also intervened when Iranians working for the British Embassy in Tehran were arrested last year.

"The trust and confidence we have built up in Iran is an asset not only for Turkey but also for the international community," Egemen Bagis, Turkey's chief EU negotiator, said.

For Mehmet Altan, economics professor at Istanbul University, the problem is that the engagement policy — dubbed "zero problems with neighbours" — promotes free trade but ignores the human rights violations of Turkey's new partners. "At the very least, dealing with these countries without insisting on human rights and democracy doesn't increase Turkey's chances of joining the EU," he said.

That is Turkey's gamble: that its relations with unsavoury Middle Eastern regimes will ultimately attract, not repel, those in the West by whom it is so anxious to be accepted.