

A review of Reset

reviewed by [John Feffer](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Reset

By Stephen Kinzer
Times Books

In the Middle East, the United States has poured money and arms into two principal allies: Israel and Saudi Arabia. Oil, strategic considerations and domestic

constituencies have guided these policies. But today, with Iraq a mess and Israeli-Palestinian relations at a nadir, the U.S. would do well to rethink its regional approach. After the confrontational policies of the Bush years, the Obama administration has promised a reset of relations with Russia. In *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future*, Stephen Kinzer argues that the U.S. should push the reset button in the Middle East as well. Instead of focusing so much on Israel and Saudi Arabia, the U.S. should take a new look at Iran and Turkey. By effecting a rapprochement with the former and deferring to the latter as a mediator, Kinzer maintains, the U.S. can help bring peace and security to a region that has had a shortage of both.

Kinzer is an evocative writer and knows this territory well. He has served as a foreign correspondent in Europe, Latin America and Turkey and has recently written a book on Iran (*All the Shah's Men*). In *Reset* he traces the parallel modernization of Iran and Turkey and their efforts to become Muslim democracies. With its many fascinating stories about modernizers, insurgents, dictators and generals, *Reset* is an excellent guide for those who know little about the 20th-century history of these two countries with rich and complex cultures.

For all the book's virtues, however, Kinzer gets bogged down in this history. Although he promises an analysis of how Turkey and Iran should figure in America's future, he doesn't get to the present until more than halfway through. Then, after finally bringing both Iran and Turkey into the post-9/11 era, Kinzer embarks on an elaborate detour into U.S. relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia when a relatively brief summary would have sufficed. Only in the last chapter does Kinzer return to the essential question he poses at the outset: how to "reset American policy in the world's most volatile region."

In this final chapter, Kinzer does deliver on his promise, though in a truncated fashion. He rightly identifies Turkey as essential to any realignment in the Middle East. Led by the Justice and Development Party, which came to power through elections in 2003, Turkey has transformed its foreign policy from an inward-looking parochialism to a dynamic engagement with neighbors and adversaries. If anything, Kinzer understates the importance of Turkey's new "zero problems with neighbors" approach and how the nation has enhanced its position by building bridges with Greece, Armenia, Syria and Russia, not to mention reaching out to Africa and Asia. He fails to mention Turkey's role in the politics of Eurasian oil and gas deals or how it is spreading its culture and educational model far and wide.

Kinzer is more interested in Turkey's role as an intermediary. "Turkey has taken on the role of mediator, conciliator, and arbitrator," he writes. "The world urgently needs some country to play that role. Few are better equipped to do so than Turkey." And indeed, Turkey has attempted to mediate between Israel and Syria, between different factions in Iraq and between Iran and the U.S.

The U.S. would do well to encourage Turkey's mediating capacity. Kinzer believes that the interests of the two countries are convergent. "Turkey's foreign policy, though independent, reinforces America's," he writes. "Both countries share key strategic goals. Both are essentially conservative. The existing world order has been good to them. They want to strengthen it, not radically reshape it."

But Kinzer downplays the fundamental challenge that Turkey offers to the United States. If Turkey ultimately joins the European Union, their combined power could challenge American hegemony. Or if Turkey throws its lot in with a constellation of other powers—Russia, Iran, Syria—it could represent a major counterforce in a region that is at the center of U.S. national interest. In some sense, however, the ambiguity of Turkish foreign policy only reinforces the importance of Kinzer's overall point: that "as the United States shapes and carries out its policies toward Muslim countries, it should do so with Turkey at its side."

U.S. policy toward Iran is even more in need of a reset. Kinzer rehearses the sorry history of U.S. meddling in that country, from the involvement in the coup that overthrew Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 and the subsequent strengthening of the repressive dictatorship of the shah, to the backing of Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War and the failed opportunities to engage Iran's reformers in the 1990s. Today the Obama administration is ratcheting up economic sanctions and threatening rhetoric. Kinzer finds this approach counterproductive: "American policies aimed at isolating Iran have had precisely the opposite effect, isolating Americans from the information and contacts they need in order to deal effectively with Iran."

Kinzer advises a different course. He's not naive about the current Iranian leadership, which he identifies as "an irresponsible and deeply disturbing factor in global politics." But engagement with Iran, like *détente* with China in the 1970s, is the better way of ensuring more predictable policies.

It's a shame that Kinzer squeezes all of his most provocative assessments into his final chapter. He misses an opportunity to explore how the current Turkish

government is reining in the influence of the military and to consider whether Iran's aborted Green Revolution will have any lasting impact on the country's political structures. His final thoughts, too, seem mere sketches. He ends by recommending the application of two diplomatic breakthroughs of the 1970s—détente with China and the Helsinki Accords in Europe—to U.S.-Iranian relations. This seems right, but he doesn't devote enough space to the thorny challenge of applying these examples.

U.S. détente with China prepared the stage for the latter to enter the international community, but it neither eliminated China's nuclear weapons program nor overcame the adversarial nature of U.S.-China relations. The Helsinki Accords, meanwhile, became synonymous with the human rights movements that eventually overthrew the communist regimes that signed the agreement. Surely the leadership in Iran is not interested in embracing such a scenario.

At the very least, *Reset* raises these tantalizing possibilities and provides the historical backdrop for understanding the necessity of transforming U.S. relationships with Turkey and Iran. It's up to the diplomats to take it to the next level.