

BETWEEN RHETORIC AND REALITY: TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY

Turkey's relationship with the U.S. seems firmly cemented on a leadership level, but Turkey's bid to join its neighbors in the West –the European Union– is not flourishing. The EU has recently taken proactive steps as a way to reignite the stalled accession talks. However, the shared concern over a fragile and explosive Middle East has drawn attention away from the reforms Turkey needs to deliver domestically if it wants to join the Union. This regional shadow is convenient for both Turkey and the EU at this point. The question remains whether a strong Sunni ambition in foreign policy can go hand in hand with Turkey's reliance on Western fortification of its borders.

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The uprisings in the Middle East have prompted both important questions and expectations about the role of Turkey in its region. Ankara has stuck by its mantra of “zero problems with neighbors”, coined by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Even though this remains the official foreign policy doctrine of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government, the reality on the ground seems fundamentally different.

Turkey’s government has enjoyed single-party rule for a decade, with the moderate Islamist AK Party winning three consecutive parliamentary elections. Despite drastic changes in the realities on the ground, the government’s official foreign policy doctrine has remained unchanged. But ostentatious rhetoric about regional leadership is often used, to a point that some believe this reflects a neo-Ottoman ambition.

Both the “zero problems” strategy, and *grotesque* words about leadership over the (Muslim) region, seem increasingly detached from the complex realities Turkey actually faces. It is time for the Turkish government to narrow the gap between rhetoric and reality in order to better anticipate its volatile surroundings. The situation in Syria in particular, will be the litmus test both for Turkey’s role in the Middle East and the world.

Relations between Turkey, its neighbors, and global players have experienced dynamism over the past 10 years. Although Turkey’s relations with Libya and Egypt are now stable, its popularity in Iraq and Syria has declined rapidly; from a 87 percent popularity rate for Turkey in Syria in 2009, tensions are now at a point where armed conflict could be imminent. And while Israel’s recent apology for the raid of the *Mavi Marmara* in which nine Turks were killed resulted in a rapprochement, it is fair to say that the relationship between the two countries remains strained.

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more welcoming leaders in Paris and Berlin, the ball is in Turkey's court. It is yet to be seen how dedicated to its EU bid the government of Turkey is. Judging by the pace of reforms towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria, Turkey's motivation for accession seems low.

Today, relations between the EU and Turkey are more based on shared concerns in the Middle East than on shared values or on the accession negotiations. The EU agrees with Turkey on the overall vision for the Middle East to democratize. But occasional strong rhetoric and surprising actions lead to serious

concerns about the ultimate ambition of the AK Party government. Strained relations are characterized by, for example, the warm welcome of wanted war criminal Omar al-Bashir, in November 2009 and Ankara's "no" vote on sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council in June 2009. More recent incidents that were puzzling and worrying to European and American allies were comments made by Prime Minister Erdoğan equating Zionism with crimes against humanity in February 2013 and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu publicly wondering why Bashar al-Assad did not "throw even a pebble" when Israel attacked the Syrian government's weapon depots in the same month. Although these remarks were most likely intended for domestic consumption, they also do damage in relation to its Western allies, perhaps more than Ankara seems to think.

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In recent years, such comments and a lack of deliverables after strongly stated ambitions have exacerbated European doubts about Turkey's ultimate goals or the effectiveness of its foreign policy. Despite the obvious failure of the "zero problems" doctrine, Turkey's leaders have not toned down their use of *grandiose* rhetoric about regional leadership. As a result of political and economical gains, Prime Minister Erdoğan seems to enjoy self-confidence almost without limits. But in the gap between words and deeds, popularity cannot sustain forever. The less his rhetoric turns into reality, the more hollow his words will appear.

It is time for Turkey's government to define an explicit point on the horizon in terms of its role in the region. The initial "zero problems with neighbors" doctrine may have sounded like a promising vision, but it also avoided pledging any specific allegiance. Turkey can no longer afford to put off a more clear identification of its foreign policy goals, not only in the short term, but also in the long term. It needs to be explicit in seeking an overlap between words and deeds.

The following words uttered by the Prime Minister in an AK Party meeting do not bode well for Turkey's ties with its Western partners:

They are praying for us in Gaza, Beirut, and Mecca. This is the massive responsibility we are shouldering. You are not only responsible for Edirne, Hakkari, and Van. You are bearing the responsibility for Nicosia, Sarajevo, Baghdad, Gaza, Jerusalem, Erbil, and Damascus. There is the responsibility for 250 innocent Syrians who were viciously massacred yesterday by having their throats slit at Banyas. I am appealing to my organization. Every life lost in Syria is one of ours. (...) We don't care who says what. What we care about is the conviction that "Believers are brothers." (...) We are not like other states. We are not a state that will keep quiet to protect its interests. We want to be able to account for ourselves when the Koran is placed in front of us.¹

Not only do these words reveal a sense of responsibility and reach of influence far beyond Turkey's borders, they are also very much religiously inspired. Surprisingly so for a secular state... To his credit, Prime Minister Erdoğan is the only leader in the world who can stand on a square in Egypt and explain the importance of secularism. He can do so in a way that brings the credibility that Western leaders lack. For better or worse, the question is whether the government will follow up its words with actions.

Ankara has used strong words in accusing the Syrian regime of some of the recent, vicious attacks on its border towns. These attacks, which are among the worst deadly terror attacks in the country's history, may well push Turkey more towards NATO and the EU. This in turn would put Turkey further from the regional driver seat than it wants to be. So far, even after one of its reconnaissance aircraft was shot down, the Turkish government has shown remarkable restraint. Its actions reflect a policy of containment more than neo-Ottoman ambitions. The government has to also consider a shift in public opinion, which is becoming increasingly critical of Turkey's role *vis-à-vis* the war in Syria. MetroPOLL surveys of September 2012 show a 28 percent approval rating of Turkish government policies towards Syria, with 66 percent against refugee flows and 76 percent against unilateral intervention. Military intervention within NATO could count on only 31 percent support.²

Besides sheltering refugees, the Free Syrian Army has had room to train and to enter back into Syria through Turkey. However, like in Lebanon and Jordan, the initial

1 "If Turkey Does not Change its Syria Policy ...," *Al-Monitor*, 1 March 2013,

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/turkey-syria-policy-backfire-sectarian.html>

2 İhsan Dağı, "Ready for a War, but Who will be the Warriors?," *Today's Zaman*, 7 October 2012,

<http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-294559-ready-for-a-war-but-who-will-be-the-warriors.html>

openness to Syrian refugees is increasingly criticized. Local communities see pressure on infrastructure and wages, and are worried about spillover effects of the war.

Domestic public opinion and the stance of the opposition parties may well be the primary reason for the Turkish government to restrain itself regarding Syria. Turkish people do not want war with a neighbor that shares a 500 kilometer border and has a strong army. Despite these objections, so far, rhetoric has not toned down. On 5 May 2013, at an AK Party event, Prime Minister Erdoğan said:

“Today, relations between the EU and Turkey are more based on shared concerns in the Middle East than on shared values or on the accession negotiations.”

When screams of slaughtered children are resonating, we can't be mute devils. You, Bashar Assad, you will pay for this. You will pay heavily, very heavily for showing courage you can't show to others to babies with pacifiers in their mouths. A blessed revenge will smother you. With God's permission we will see this criminal asked to account and bless his almighty. What is going on has long reached the point of forcing the limits of tolerance. The international community has not yet taken the steps expected from it about Syria. (...) To the Syrians who ask when is God's help coming, I say there is no doubt God's help is near.³

The Syrian war has brought a new mix of regional interests to the forefront. Underneath specific questions about how to end the bloodshed in Syria in the short term, are the contours of a regional proxy war which could be determining the borders of the Middle East in a new way. That makes Turkey a stakeholder in the outcome of the war.

If Iran is on one side of this proxy war, Turkey's rhetoric suggests it is on the other, “Sunni” side. Ankara's cooperation with Gulf states also suggests this alliance. The question remains whether a strong Sunni ambition in foreign policy can go hand in hand with Turkey's reliance on Western fortification of its borders. The Syrian war may well push the Turkish government to make a choice between being an independent regional power, allied to the Sunni nations, or a Western NATO ally. If such a choice is not pro-actively made, events on the ground will continue to shape Turkey's position relative to its neighbors.

³ *Al-Monitor* (2013).

In the short term, the question of whether EU member states will arm the Syrian opposition will arise. At the end of May, the weapon embargo of the EU will run out, and can only be continued on the basis of unanimity. Even though arms already flow into Syria, heavy arms in a fragile region can have serious implications the day after Assad falls.

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Despite all the complex dynamics between Turkey and its neighboring countries, Turkey is seen as a key regional player and ally by both the EU and the U.S. The need for EU and NATO allies to tilt the balance of power in Syria has them relying on Turkey. Similarly, Turkey relies on Western allies. Patriot rockets placed in Turkey by three NATO allies are intended to fortify its border with Syria. It is even fair to say the

shared concern over a fragile and explosive Middle East has drawn attention away from the reforms Turkey needs to deliver domestically if it wants to join the EU. The urgent challenges of war and the humanitarian crisis distract from the most difficult questions that the EU and Turkey must address. This regional shadow is convenient for both Turkey and the EU at this point. But the urgent developments may bring them back into full light.

Additionally, it remains to be seen whether Turkey’s own population will continue to accept big words that are not backed by actions. And even if strong words work well at home, rhetoric is not merely consumed domestically, it will also have policy effects internationally.

If seen as aligned with the Sunni half of the Middle East, Turkey’s credibility as an independent regional broker will effectively end. Correspondingly, Turkey’s alliance with NATO and its EU accession process will be strained if Ankara continues its identification and ambitions.

In the absence of a realistic vision, and amidst confusing speeches, we can only guess what Turkey’s role will end up being. This uncertainty stands in stark contrast with the self-confidence of the Turkish government, and makes Turkey a weak ally, especially in these challenging times.



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