

WASHINGTON CONCERNED AS TURKEY LEAVING THE WEST

Turkey is facing a tough choice: if it wants to emerge as a “first world” economy and a liberal democracy, it needs to protect its interests in the West and expand ties with the United States. Such a choice would dictate both internal and foreign policy priorities, different from policies aimed at becoming a leader of the Muslim/Middle Eastern world. If, instead, Turkey prefers to be a “Sultan” in the East, it will continue to emphasize the priorities that are now in place: attack Israel, develop ties with radical Islamists from Tehran to Gaza to Khartoum, and irreversibly change the nature of the country.

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ince taking power in landslide democratic elections in 2002, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) is leading Turkey into a new direction, both domestically and in foreign policy. This direction includes rapprochement with Iran; working more closely with the Islamist regime of Sudan despite the indictment of its president on genocide charges; support of the Hamas movement which rules Gaza; and stronger ties with Russia and China, including military and nuclear cooperation. Turkey's leaders have deliberately worked to undermine relations with the country's former friend and ally Israel, while failing to reach a breakthrough with neighboring Armenia.

Domestically, the AKP has emasculated the military; consolidated the media in the hands of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; launched the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer conspiracy cases not just to punish a few those who might be involved in illicit activities, but to intimidate the military and nationalist circles; and consolidated control over the police and secret services.

From the point of view of the U.S., this direction is detrimental to Turkey's traditional secular democracy, as well as to its close relations with the West. Washington sees AKP leadership, including Prime Minister Erdoğan, President Abdullah Gül, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, championing a process in which Turkey is coming under the rule of a populist authoritarian regime rooted in Islamism. This is of grave concern, particularly as the AKP has formulated a foreign policy concept that pointedly shifts the country away from the United States, as demonstrated when Ankara cancelled the "Anatolian Eagle" air force maneuvers with the U.S. and instead invited China to step in.¹ Meanwhile, accession to the European Union has stalled as no aqis-based new reforms have been enacted since 2005.

"All Politics is Local; All Foreign Policy is Domestic"

Prime Minister Erdoğan, when he was mayor of Istanbul, famously said that "democracy is like a street-car, you ride it until you arrive at your destination and then you step off."² The AKP's actions, and particularly a number of the Prime Minister's outbursts, have demonstrated that this aphorism is important. A new, more religiously observant political and social elite from Anatolia and the Black Sea towns is increasingly challenging the traditional, Istanbul- and Ankara-based secularist Kemalist elite's dominance of Turkish political life and foreign policy.

¹ Şebnem Arsu and Isabel Kershner, "Drills canceled after Turkey excludes Israel", *The New York Times*, 11 October 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/12/world/europe/12turkey.html?scp=1&sq=turkey%20excludes%20israel%20from%20air%20exercise&st=cse>

² Christopher Caldwell, "The East in the West", *The New York Times*, 25 September 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/25/magazine/25turkey.html?pagewanted=print>

This is happening at times through questionable use of the Turkish criminal justice system. In the “Ergenekon conspiracy”, 600 suspects, including former military generals, senior officers and intellectuals, were arrested in 2007.³ Their phones had been tapped, and the wiretaps were illegally leaked to the pro-AKP media. By inventing or exaggerating beyond measure literally a “wide-ranging right wing conspiracy”, investigators – presumably inspired by the ruling AKP or, as some believe, by religious networks - instilled a climate of fear, especially among secular politicians, the business elite, the military, and intellectuals.

The arrests were not the only indications that the ruling party is willing to stifle the opposition – despite promises to liberalize Turkish civil society. Recently, Prime Minister Erdoğan responded to Wikileaks-reported allegations of embezzlement with, “Don’t forget that the person who once alleged that I have one billion dollars is in jail as an Ergenekon suspect now.”⁴ This statement implies that Prime Minister Erdoğan will comfortably sacrifice Turkish civil society, independent judiciary, and freedom of the press to consolidate AKP power.

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Another famous case of politically-driven pressure against Erdoğan’s critics is the regime’s crackdown on the media, which triggered accusations of “Putinization” from journalists and secularists. The Doğan Group, a media conglomerate which stood firmly against the AKP though its news agencies and which reported on the AKP’s connections to a German Islamist charity, was served a 3.3 billion dollar fine for “tax evasion”⁵ – a sum greater than the net worth of the company. At the time of this writing, the business outlook of the Doğan Group remains bleak.

The recent constitutional referendum was further evidence of the AKP’s move to consolidate its power. Nestled among several innocuous amendments were constitutional changes regarding the military and judiciary, both traditional defenders of Kemalist, secular, democratic values. These changes either stripped the

³ Varun Vira, “The Neo Ottomans: Looking East Without Looking Back,” *Foreign Policy Journal*, 15 June 2010, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2010/06/15/the-neo-ottomans-looking-east-without-looking-back>

⁴ Marc Champion, “Turkey disputes U.S. Claim”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704594804575648382616807158.html>

⁵ Marc Champion, “Turkish media group wins a round in tax cases”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 October 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125513202532477287.html>

new foreign policy concept is to emerge as a regional hegemon through developing economic presence, interdependence, and a conspicuously important diplomatic role. To this end, Turkey has promoted visa-free travel with “Shams” –the former Greater Syria provinces of the Ottoman Empire, including Lebanon, Syria and Jordan– and excluding Israel. It also has moved closer to Russia, China, Iran, and the neighboring Muslim states.

Russian Rapprochement

The end of the Cold War meant that Turkey and Russia no longer shared a border. They could bury over three hundred years of confrontation, which cost the Ottoman Empire large territories along the northern shores of the Black Sea, including the Crimea and parts of the Caucasus, as well as parts of South-Eastern Europe.

On December 2004, Vladimir Putin became the first Russian president to visit Turkey in 32 years. His visit precipitated increased high-level political contacts between the two countries, and Turkey’s relations with Russia have improved notably since then.⁷ Ankara and Moscow share business and geopolitical interests. Russia became Turkey’s largest trade partner in 2008, and there are hopes that trade could reach 100 billion dollars in the next five years.⁸ Such a major increase in trade would be, in part, due to the 20 billion dollar nuclear plant agreement signed by the two leaders in May 2010, to be built near Mersin on the southern coast.

Given that the price for other Russian reactors, for example, the Belene nuclear plant in Bulgaria, which was reportedly four billion euros in 2008, one must ask why Turkey and Russia are building a two-unit plant for nearly five times the cost. With the crackdown on independent media, and the executive branch firmly under firm AKP control, Turkey appears to be lacking any institution authorized to audit this or other high price tag transactions, fight corruption or examine the beneficiaries of deals such as the Mersin nuclear reactor. Furthermore, Russia and Turkey have signed several agreements regarding guaranteed purchases of oil and gas at a fixed price, and Russia has agreed to build an oil transit line from Samsun to Ceyhan.

As well as economic advances, Turkey has developed a no-visa requirement treaty with the Russians, which will allow for much greater travel and interaction between the two nations. This burgeoning close relationship with Prime Minister Putin’s assertive and revisionist Russia also marks the progress of Turkey’s realignment away from its traditional allies. It is also forging new and closer friendships in the Middle East.

⁷ Stephen F. Larrabee, “Troubled Partnership: U.S.–Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change”, *RAND Corporation*, 2010, p. 48, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG899.pdf

⁸ Marc Champion, “Russia, Turkey Pair Up in Trade Deals”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 May 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704247904575240312539235750.html>

The Return of the Sultan?

Turkey's position throughout the Middle East combines the old and the new: Erdoğan and Davutoğlu clearly oppose any strengthening of the PKK and the Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq. However, they have shown that they are willing to protect Islamic interests on the basis of their common faith. Most recent evidence of this is the WikiLeaks-reported supply of weapons to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which clearly went against U.S. and NATO interests. Moreover, the alleged supply of NATO ammunition to Iran is something that needs to be carefully looked into by U.S. investigators.

Despite the designation of Hamas as a terrorist organization by both the EU and the U.S., the AKP administration has opened communication with the Islamist group. This despite Hamas' recent coup in the Gaza Strip against the secular Palestine Liberation Organization and its charter pledge to annihilate Israel. In 2010, Davutoğlu met with Khaled Meshaal, the Damascus-based leader of Hamas' political wing. Prime Minister Erdoğan also defended Hamas at a Konya rally in June 2010: "I do not think that Hamas is a terrorist organization. I said the same thing to the United States..."⁹

Similarly, in August 2010, an Italian newspaper reported that intelligence officials from Turkey, Iran, Syria and Lebanon had guaranteed a flow of weapons to Hezbollah.¹⁰ Davutoğlu's surrogates defended Turkey's outreach to a number of terrorist groups as a part of its "zero problems with neighbors" policy.

However, this willingness to talk apparently does not apply to relations with Israel. Even after its welcomed extension of fire-fighting assistance to Israel, President Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan hastened to clarify that "friendship with Israel is over" and "it is out of the question for Israel to use NATO facilities", apparently referring to NATO missile defense radar to be deployed in future. As often happens, the Turkish leaders made a mistake, alleging that "Israel does not even cooperate with NATO."¹¹ In reality, NATO-Israel ties are robust, within the Mediterranean Dialogue and beyond. Prominent U.S. foreign policy experts have even suggested that Israel become a member of NATO, among other things, to deter Iran.

⁹ "Turkish PM describes Hamas as fighting for own lands", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 4 June 2010, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=pm-describes-hamas-as-resister-for-own-lands-2010-06-04>

¹⁰ "Arms from Turkey, Syria, Iran to Hezbollah" (quoting *Corriere della Sera*), *United Press International*, 12 August 2010, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2010/08/12/Arms-from-Turkey-Syria-Iran-to-Hezbollah/UPI-13021281617625/ The report specifically mentions names of senior Turkish and Iranian officials who facilitated the transaction.

¹¹ "Turkey Calls Israel's Use of NATO's Facilities 'Out of Question'", *Today's Zaman*, 4 December 2010, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-228685-turkey-calls-israels-use-of-nato-facilities-out-of-the-question.html>

AKP Dismantles Ties with Israel

Turkey's position on Israel, its former Middle Eastern ally, has shifted dramatically in the course of this geopolitical realignment. Turkey gradually abandoned its role as a neutral mediator between Israel and its Arab neighbors and has become an active supporter of Arab and Muslim causes against Israel. Ankara denounced Operation Cast Lead, Israel's counter-terrorism campaign against Hamas in December 2008-January 2009. Prime Minister Erdoğan played a leading role in chastising Israel despite the fact that the operation was provoked by Hamas, which had fired 8,000 rockets at Israeli civilian targets and in the fall of 2008 greatly expanded the radius of destruction, to include the Israeli cities of Ashqelon, Beer-Sheva and Gedera.

"Turkey's support for Iran's nuclear program that proves to Washington that Turkey's foreign policy objectives are changing."

Shortly afterward, Erdoğan angrily stormed off the stage during a joint appearance with Israeli President Shimon Peres, a leading dove, at a conference in Davos, Switzerland, shouting: "When it comes to killing, you know well how to kill."¹²

The relationship further disintegrated after the Gaza flotilla tragic incident, in which the Mavi Marmara ferry and several other vessels set out to defy the Israeli blockade of Gaza by sailing on a mission which purported to bring humanitarian aid. The Israeli commandos who boarded the ferry were ill-prepared for what ensued when they boarded the ferry and found themselves faced with armed resistance by Islamist activists on board who confronted the Israelis with firearms, knives, and metal bars. The Israelis began to fire after one of them was thrown some 20 feet down by his attackers, a pistol was fired, and it was clear that their lives were endangered. Regrettably, nine Turks were killed before the melee ended.

The Turkish response was overwhelming. Turkey withdrew its ambassador, announcing he would not return unless until Israel apologizes and pays compensation to the relatives of those killed in the fight. Ankara rewrote its national security threat assessment document ("the Red Book"), removed Iran and placed Israel on the critical threats list.¹³ Ankara insisted on removing Iran from the NATO threat

¹² Katrin Bennhold, "Leaders of Turkey, Israel Clash at Davos", *The New York Times*, 30 January 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html>

¹³ "Turkish 'Red Book' Irks Israel", *Turkish Weekly*, 1 November 2010, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/109122/turkish-39-red-book-39-irks-israel-.html>

assessment in relation to the missile defense deployment (although Iran is mentioned in the “wise men” document on which missile defense concept is based). It went on to demand that the new NATO missile defense system would not protect “non-NATO states”, specifically Israel, and has tried to limit Turco-Israeli trade, even going so far as to cancel a meeting of the Israel-Turkey Business Council which had been set for December 2010 and annulling the Bank Hapoalim Turkish affiliate’s sole bid for a bankrupt Turkish bank. Despite what had been multi-million dollar Israeli tourism and military-industrial cooperation, the Turkish leadership is apparently willing to forego any remaining business ties.

While Ankara and Prime Minister Erdoğan in particular have repeatedly condemned Israel and personally attacked its 87 year old Nobel Peace Prize winning president for “murder” and “committing atrocities and genocide” in Gaza, Erdoğan embraced Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir, whose regime has deployed armed Islamic horsemen (the Janjaweed) to conduct a genocidal campaign against opposition forces in Darfur. Erdoğan displayed his ideological bias in a statement insisting that the Sudanese tyrant “could not have committed genocide in Darfur, because he is a Muslim and Muslims do not commit genocide.”¹⁴ 10 Ironically, and perhaps as a result of this or other positions he has taken, Erdoğan was awarded the Muammar Qaddafi Prize for Human Rights, a prize funded by the former terrorist-supporting Libyan leader.

Iran: The Litmus Test

Above all else, however, it is Turkey’s support for Iran’s nuclear program that proves to Washington that Turkey’s foreign policy objectives are changing. Ankara, once an important ally in helping to contain Iran, has become a friendly diplomatic ally of the Islamist dictatorship in Tehran. Turkey remained mum when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps brutally cracked down on protesters after the election results of 2009 were contested.

Working with the Lula government in Brazil, Ankara aided and abetted Iran’s efforts to forestall UN sanctions in response to its long-standing nuclear defiance. Turkey and Brazil colluded with Iran to resurrect a nuclear fuel swap proposal originally hatched by the Obama Administration in the fall of 2009. Erdoğan’s administration even defended his decision by suggesting that a U.S. presidential letter, addressed to Brazil’s leadership, authorized them to pursue the plan despite the international call for sanctions on Iran. However, the Obama letter warned Brazil about previous Iranian perfidy in conducting nuclear talks while ignoring such important issues as the necessity to expatriate all of the nuclear mass produced by

¹⁴ Soner Çağaptay, “The AKP’s Hamas Policy I: How Turkey Turned,” *Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review*, 29 June 2010, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=the-akp8217s-hamas-policy-i-how-turkey-turned-2010-06-29>

the Iranian enrichment program, install IAEA controls, and verifiably shut down any potential military applications, including enrichment. Thus, the letter was anything but a green light for Brazil, let alone the NATO ally, Turkey, to pursue a separate track in dealing with Iran. Furthermore, Ankara bluntly opposed the UN Security Council vote on sanctions despite support from such difficult partners as Russia and China.

Soft Power Games

Turkey is changing its soft-power approach to the Middle Eastern world in three ways: first, it is enabling Iran's expanding television penetration, as Iran develops Turkish-language programming, to be watched in Turkey, in addition to programs in Arabic and Farsi. Second, Al-Jazeera is launching a Turkish-language service, to be directed by the authors of a sympathetic biography of the Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, titled "Hoca" [Teacher].

Finally, Turkish television is launching another notorious season in the Valley of the Wolves series. While "Valley of the Wolves: Iraq" depicted brutal and grotesque Americans and an Israeli organ-harvesting doctor, "Valley of the Wolves: Palestine" will hail a Turkish intelligence officer who is shipped to Israel to kill an Israeli military officer. One wonders if this is an opening salvo designed to prepare the Turkish public opinion for Turkish involvement in and support of Hamas and Hezbollah terrorist operations against Israel.

U.S. Concerns Ignored

How does Turkey's realignment impact U.S.-Turkish relations? While President Obama used the term "model relationship" while speaking in Turkey in 2009, declaring that Atatürk's legacy is a "strong, secular democracy", Erdoğan's reforms have limited the country's democracy, and the Turkish unwillingness to work with U.S. puts the partnership in question.¹⁵ After all, the AKP government offered a condominium to Russia in the Caucasus amidst the Russo-Georgian war; delayed U.S. aid from reaching Georgia during the same 2008 conflict; became Iran's advocate; possibly facilitated arms transfers to Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah; and have ignored President Obama's requests to improve relations with Israel. And it is true that Turkey has devoted resources to the Afghan War and peacekeeping in the Balkans, and for that the U.S. is grateful, but these are not sufficient grounds to assume that all is well in the relationship.

¹⁵ Michael D. Shear and Kevin Sullivan, "In Turkey, Obama Reaches Out to Muslim World", *The Washington Post*, 7 April 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/06/AR2009040600946.html>

Conclusions

Turkey is facing a tough choice: if it wants to emerge as a “First World” economy and a liberal democracy, it needs to protect its interests in the West and expand ties with the United States. Such a choice would dictate both internal and foreign policy priorities, different from policies aimed at becoming a leader of the Muslim/Middle Eastern world. If, instead, Turkey prefers to be a “Sultan” in the East, it will continue to emphasize the priorities that are now in place: attack Israel, develop ties with radical Islamists from Tehran to Gaza to Khartoum, and irreversibly change the nature of the country.

The United States must devote more energy to shaping the U.S.-Turkish relationship, and hope that a firmer policy will either force the AKP leadership to compromise on its new policies or make it substantially less popular in the country. The United States must try to do this through positive and negative mechanisms, including:

- Appoint and approve an ambassador and re-examine the embassy work in Ankara. While the current candidate’s confirmation is being held up in the Senate, it is critical that there be a capable and strong American diplomatic presence in Turkey which can equally communicate and collaborate with the government, the opposition, and the civil society.
- Work with the European Union to boost cooperation with Turkey, including on accession talks. The EU must recognize Turkey’s importance to Europe’s past and present security and prosperity, and while it is necessary for Europe to criticize Turkey’s political changes, it is equally necessary for Turkey to abide by European norms of democracy, rule of law, freedom of the press, and counter corruption.
- Lay out clearly to the Turks where their policies are detrimental to American interests, and how the United States will deter or motivate changes in Turkish behavior.
- Demand that Israel and Turkey successfully proceed with a reconciliation process. While Israel may make some sort of amends, it must be done without losing face and credibility. For example, request that Israeli and Turkish diplomats meet behind closed doors, decide on a joint statement expressing regret on the loss of human lives and forgiveness. Compensation can be paid by a private foundation, then both sides can declare victory and move toward realignment. While

the recent brush-fires in Israel are a national tragedy, laudable Turkish assistance in fighting the fire is viewed by Israeli public opinion as positive and symbolic and should be used as an opening for a rapprochement. On the other hand, re-launch of “aid” flotillas to Hamas terrorists in Gaza will be viewed negatively both in Washington and in Jerusalem.

- Participate in development of Turkey’s agricultural and industrial sectors, to expand America’s economic market-share in Turkey.

In this way, the U.S. may yet form a “model partnership” from Turkey – but only if Turkey clarifies its own national priorities and begins to act accordingly. It is true that Turkey’s geopolitical location is uniquely advantageous, as it sits as the bridge between Europe, the Middle East and the Caucasus. This location brings dividends beyond energy transit, but it is Turkey’s job to realize its options, choosing the correct ones. The United States is interested in a partnership with Turkey, but it takes two to tango.