

## **DIRECTIONLESS TURKEY: QUO VADIS?**

*Various opinion surveys this year have illustrated a visible swing from the West and, sometimes, towards the East. Empirical evidence supports the findings of these surveys. The apparent confusion in the Turkish thinking is the result of a combination of historical, recent and present-day factors. But a popular slide from the West should not necessarily mean a popular (or governmental) slide towards the East. There are deep-rooted historical, religious, ethnic and practical reasons why Turkey cannot easily ally with Russia and/or Iran. Therefore, Turks' pro-eastern sentiments are a reality, but they are not necessarily pro-eastern in ethos. Directionless Turkey will probably resume its two-centuries-old journey to the West, be it the Old Continent, or the New.*

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**A**t the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Turks were deeply divided over the European aspirations of Sultan Selim III. More than two centuries later, the Republic's Turks, too, are divided over their country's identity and strategic destination. Should Turkey ally with the West, either anchoring to the European Union or the United States, once Turkey's major western partner; should it turn eastwards in search of alliances based on common religion or common interest; or, could Turkey be strategically self-sufficient? The latter is often manifested by nationalist tendencies; as evinced by the recent revival of a Turkish idiom almost forgotten until a few years earlier: No friends for the Turks other than the Turks.

### *Confused minds*

Various opinion surveys this year have illustrated a visible swing from the West and, sometimes, towards the East. Although the slide from the West can feasibly be explained by diverging interests and the public perceptions of these diverging interests, the leaning towards the East is probably largely 'reactive.' Distancing from the West should not automatically mean getting closer to the East. In fact, increasing nationalism and 'easternism' are only natural derivatives of anti-westernism. Hence the often confusing data from opinion polls. For example;

1. A poll conducted jointly by Istanbul's Bilgi University and Infakto Research Workshop on 18-28 February 2006 (before the Kurdish riots in Turkey's southeast) revealed that 35 percent of the Turks view the United States as the top security threat against their homeland.<sup>1</sup> Slightly over 25 percent see a potential Kurdish state in northern Iraq as the top security threat; 9.5 percent think neighboring Greece is the threat; 5.5 percent feel threatened by the EU; and four percent choose Israel when asked to identify foreign threat.
2. Another poll, this summer, showed that only 43 percent of the Turks support EU membership, down from 60 percent six months earlier (and 75 percent two years earlier). The Turkish support for EU membership, according to a Eurobarometer survey<sup>2</sup>, fell to 44 percent in September, and, according to pollsters A&G, to less than one third in October.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, 57 percent of Turks believe that the Europeans are hostile to Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Türkiye'de Milliyetçilik Araştırması, *Tempo*, No: 957, 6 April 2006

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *EuroBarometer Report* No: 62,  
[http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62\\_tr\\_exec.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62_tr_exec.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> AG Danışmanlık, *Türkiye AB'ye Girmeli Mi?*, <http://www.agarastirma.com.tr/abrapordosyasi.asp>

<sup>4</sup> Pew Global Attitudes, *Islamic Extremism: Common Concern For Muslim and Western Publics*,  
<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=248>, 11 August 2006

3. Although only nine percent of Turks prefer Sharia rule in their country, from a reverse angle, only three in every four Turks oppose Sharia rule in their country - the remaining one, or 25 percent, either supports or is undecided about Sharia rule.<sup>5</sup>
4. Fifty-one percent of Turks identify themselves with Islam first (and only 19 percent with Turkishness). That 51 percent compares with 38 percent in Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim country. Probably based on the same 'identity sentiments' 69 percent of Turks believe it is a bad thing if non-Muslim religions proliferated in their country; and 44 percent of Turks are sympathetic to HAMAS, and 53 percent support Iran.
5. According to a recent poll by SWP Stiftung, 62 percent of Turks say they are nationalist, and 32.3 percent say they are "fully nationalist," or extreme nationalist.<sup>6</sup>
6. Also according to A&G, 2.8 percent of Turks view France as a friendly country. That is 3.2 percent for Britain, 3.6 percent for the United States, 4.2 percent for Greece, 8.7 percent for Russia and as high as 29 percent for Iran. The same poll reveals that only 7.2 percent of Turks trust the EU. The A&G study confirms the findings of the Transatlantic Trends Survey 2006 which revealed that Turks feel twice warm towards Iran as they do towards the United States.
7. According to pollsters Taylor Nelson Sofres, 72 percent of Turks blame the Lebanon war on Israel (compared to 59 percent even in Lebanon); and other than Israel and Lebanon, 64 percent of them blame the war on the United States (compared to a world average of 34 percent).<sup>7</sup>

What do these figures indicate? Assuming that there is at least some guiding truth in multiple-source polling reports we can conclude;

1. Nearly eight in every 10 Turks perceive a security threat from the United States, a Kurdish state in U.S.-controlled Iraq, the EU, Greece (as an entity other than the EU), and Israel. Put in other words, 80 percent of the Turks view the West a security threat while 70 percent of them also say Turkey should ally with the West.
2. Fewer Turks tend to think EU membership would be good for their country, although membership is an official objective. More than half of Turks, meanwhile, think that the Europeans are hostile to their religion - Islam.
3. A quarter of Turks are either supportive or indifferent to Sharia rule, only three quarters categorically oppose it.
4. Less than one in 10 Turks trust the club their country has struggled to join over the past four decades and aims to share a common vision with.
5. More Turks consider themselves as Muslim first than as Turks. They largely feel a kind of religious xenophobia, are sympathetic to HAMASs, and blame the

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<sup>5</sup> Turkish Daily News, *The Turks*, <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=48650>, 12 July 2006

<sup>6</sup> Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, *Upsurge Amidst Political Uncertainty: Nationalism in Post-2004 Turkey*, *SWP Stiftung Research Paper*, October 2006,

<sup>7</sup> Turkish Daily News, *Directionless Turkey*, <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=53958>, 13 September 2006

Middle East conflict -and violence, too- on Israel and the United States at rates well over the world average.

6. For the Turks, the three countries, Greece, Russia and Iran, all considered as security threats according to the National Security Policy Document, are friendlier to Turkey than the United States, Britain and France, none of which is officially viewed as a security threat.

### ***Apolitical anti-westernism***

There is empirical evidence, too, that supports the findings of opinion surveys. For example, two books, “Those Crazy Turks” and “Metal Storm,” historical best-sellers in Turkey, feature, respectively, epic and fiction tales appealing to nationalist sentiments. The changing *fabric of the nation* has also enthusiastically embraced, this time in a motion best-seller, another product, “The Valley of the Wolves,” which features Turkish underground heroes teaching a lesson to evil Americans and Jews in northern Iraq. Attacks against Catholic priests and the magnitude of popular support for the Great Union of Jurists, a grouping of nationalist lawyers, have characterized Turkey in the year 2006.

The year 2006 also saw bizarre political campaigning by opposition parties and various nationalistic groups against laws that allow foreigners to buy property on Turkish territory. The nationalist *pact*, including the main opposition Republican People’s Party, united around claims that the property sales were part of a foreign plot aimed to “invade the Turkish soil inch by inch.” Figures should tell. By mid 2006, a total of 61,813 title deeds (covering an area of 178 million square meters) had been sold to foreign subjects. Altogether they hardly account for one-sixth of the district of Mamak in Ankara, or less than half of the forest land lost in fires.

Anti-American, anti-European, anti-Israeli (anti-Jewish, too, but not necessarily) or generally anti-western attitudes are not new in Turkey. But there is difference this time, and a worrying one. In the 1970s, anti-westernism in Turkey was limited to a couple of (otherwise opposite) extreme ideologies: Far-left and radical Islam. In present-day Turkey, anti-Americanism is an apolitical phenomenon, not limited to any ideology. Islamists, nationalists, Kemalists, liberals, social democrats, leftists... your cleaning lady, the waiter at your favorite restaurant, the owner of the shop on the corner, the taxi driver... even the modern Turkish youth who try to live like Europeans or Americans are anti-European or anti-American.

### ***The etymology***

The “confusion” is the result of a combination of historical, recent and present-day factors. It reflects a kind of love-and-hate relationship between the Turks and the West, a combined heritage of the Ottoman Empire, the Treaty of Sevres, the Cold War alliances, the post-Cold War fears and Turkey’s changing demographics.

The standard recipe for the Turkish swing from the West includes (a) the unpopular war in Iraq, (b) the public perception of the U.S. administration as a “bully superpower,” (c) Washington’s solid alliance with Iraqi Kurds, in view of PKK violence in Turkey and Turkish suspicions over the fate of Kirkuk and over the establishment of a Kurdish state, (d) U.S. post-9/11 policies in the Middle East that often have comprised additional impetus in the Muslim world for the rise of anti-Americanism, (e) The EU’s seeming reluctance (institutional and public) to admit Turkey as a full member and, as a result, a general Turkish belief in European ‘discrimination’ and ‘double-standards’, (f) a belated but increasing awareness in Turkey (institutional and public) that the membership process would also entail giving up partial sovereignty, (g) a visible “Islamization” of the Turkish society and bureaucracy in the last decade which went parallel with scores of incidents that supported Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations,” and (h) a general feeling of insecurity for having to neighbor one of the world’s most unstable regions.

Many even pro-western Turks feel that Europe has criticized them unfairly or even repelled them. They think that the Eastern European states were supported to an unprecedented degree, practically pushed into the EU, while member states add - sometimes unacknowledged- barriers against Turkish entry by the day, including explosive issues like Cyprus and Armenian genocide disputes.

For example, with three carefully-planned moves in a span of a few months this year – and with best timing -the French political machinery has (a) pushed Turkey away from Europe, (b) added generous quantities of gasoline into the fire that is all sorts of dangerous Turkish ‘isms’ (nationalism, Islamism, isolationism and anti-westernism) which, no doubt, will in return push Europe a few extra years away from Turkey, (c) significantly spoiled transatlantic plans for this part of the world, and (d) won many hearts in France’s (and Europe’s) anti-Turkish circles.

Meanwhile, Islamic conservatives who once believed in the virtues of the EU process with mainly a view of “religious freedoms” have been deeply disappointed over the European Court of Human Rights which ruled that banning the headscarf in schools, universities and public offices did not constitute rights violations.

So, the EU process has lost part of its appeal to different Turkish ideologies for different reasons: Headscarf ban for the Islamists, Cyprus and the Armenian genocide for the nationalists, Cyprus, Armenian genocide and pressure on the military for the secularists.

### ***Quo vadis, then?***

“Eurasianism,” these days one of the many umbrella “isms” that bring together the old foes, nationalists and most of the ultra left (Maoists, Marxists, Leninists and even Trotskysts), looks like an impossible dream, such as its post-Bolshevik Revolution version, pan-Turkism, was. Only a “Crazy Turk” would believe in the possible resurgence of Enver Pasha’s ambitions in the lands that are today, in real-politik terms, more Soviet/Russian, Chinese, Shia and even American than Turkish.

Could Turkey, then, see any prospects at the western end of the emerging eastern axis – Russia, Iran, Pakistan (or perhaps India) and China? True, politics has always made strange bedfellows, but are Iran and Russia viable destinations of strategic partnership, like General Tuncer Kılınç, former head of the National Security Council, proposed in 2002?<sup>8</sup> Could Gen. Kılınç have prophesized so precisely at a time when all the others were too busy shining the idea of a European future? Probably not.

The justification for the proposed Turco-Persian alliance is often based on (a) common religion, (b) a peaceful past as evinced by the fact that the Turkish-Iranian border has remained unchanged since the 1639 Treaty of Kasr-ı Şirin (the Treaty of Zuhab), (c) Iran's helping hand in Turkey's fight against the PKK, and (d) increasing economic cooperation, including a major energy supply line from Iran.

All the same, (a) Turkey's ruling elite are Sunni, and Sunnis and the Shia have only allied against "infidels" since the advent of Islam and otherwise have fought bloody wars, as they still do, (b) the peaceful past is a myth, as evinced by a full-scale war in 1733 when the Persians fought to take Baghdad from the Ottomans; the Zand Dynasty's attack on Ottoman Basra in 1775, an invasion lasted until 1821 when another war broke out and lasted till 1823; an 1840 conflict over the control of what is today Iran's Khorramshar; Iranian support in 1930 for Kurdish uprisings and subsequent dispute over the border; and, finally, the alleged killings of Turkish intellectuals by cells operated by Mullah Tehran in attempts to "export regime," (c) Iran's fight against the PKK is only conjectural, since the Tehran regime systematically harbored the PKK before it noticed Kurdish separatism threatened its own security too, (d) an eastern neighbor with nuclear weapons is more of a threat for Turkey than a trading partner and a steady supplier of natural gas and crude oil.

True, also, that Turkey's (mostly economic) relations with Russia have developed exponentially. But this is, in essence, an exponentially developing trade partnership, not an exponentially developing strategic alliance. There is still deep mutual distrust among the security apparatus of both states, despite some improvement since the end of the Cold War.

A visible majority of Turks physically or sentimentally sympathize with Russia's own PKK, the Chechen terrorists. It is still fresh in memories: On a hot July day this year when thousands of Turks were mourning over the coffins wrapped in the Crescent and Star -soldiers killed by the PKK- bigger crowds were holding funeral prayers in absentia in several Turkish cities for Shamil Basayev, the legendary commander of Chechen terrorists.

Turks are in a very bizarre state of mind: They are allies with the United States but they see Washington as the biggest security threat; they want to join the EU but they don't trust it; their military is their most trusted institution and at the same time cooperates with the Israeli military "in depth" while they feel hostile to the Jewish state; some of them see

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<sup>8</sup> Basın, Yayın ve Enformasyon Genel Müdürlüğü, *Dış Basında Türkiye*, <http://www.byegm.gov.tr/YAYINLARIMIZ/DISBASIN/2002/03/14x03x02.HTM>, 14 Mart 2002

Russia as a hope but most of them sympathize with those who kill Russian children; some of them see Iran as a potential partner, but the Tehran regime appears on top of their National Security Council's threat paper; their government's genes are truly Islamic but it shyly courts what most of their religious extremists see as the Satan - the United States.

Turks' "pro-eastern" sentiments are a reality, but they are not necessarily "pro-eastern" in ethos; they are more "reactive," than pro-eastern. The Crescent and Star may be sliding away from the West and drifting to the East, but in fact it is sailing towards the unknown waters of "directionlessness."

### ***Conclusion***

Although the basic features of the "confused Turkish thinking" are largely unattractive and often tautological, this should not be a cause for fatalism. There is fundamental difference between a Turkey having difficulties with the West (the EU, the United States and even Israel) and one totally and institutionally drifted away from the West for good; between rising nationalism in polls as largely a "reactive motive" and "full nationalism" in governance (and, thus, foreign policy).

There are early indications, these days, that even if the directionless Turkey appears to be swinging away from the West due to various externalities and internalities, it will probably resume its two centuries old journey to the West -be it the Old Continent, or the New, the latter, probably with its military as a catalyst. Further scaring the cat that feels frightened and cornered will bring no good to anyone, including the cat.