

RESET: IRAN, TURKEY AND AMERICA'S FUTURE

Excerpted from Stephen Kinzer's latest book, "Reset: Iran, Turkey and America's Future," this piece evaluates Turkey's foreign policy orientation with a focus on Turkey's relations with the EU, the U.S., and Middle Eastern countries. According to Kinzer, "Turkey is no longer on the edge of anything. Instead it is once again what this piece of geography has been since time immemorial: the epicenter of the immense Eurasian landmass. The combination of Turkey's location, its Ottoman heritage, and its successful blend of Islam and democracy gives it enormous strategic potential. It is seizing that potential in ways that benefit not only itself, but also the United States and the West."

Copyright © 2010 by Stephen Kinzer. Reprinted by arrangement with Times Books, an imprint of Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

Stephen Kinzer*



* Stephen Kinzer is a former *New York Times* bureau chief for Istanbul. His other books focus on Rwanda, Central America, the U.S. and Iran; among them, his 2001 released book, *Crescent and the Star: Turkey Between Two Worlds* is a well acclaimed piece which has also been translated into Turkish.

Chapter 8: Where They Come Together, pp. 195-204.

Communication and dialogue is the path to peace and compromise.

– Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey



scene never before imagined played out in Ankara at mid morning on an autumn day in 2007. President Shimon Peres of Israel strode purposefully to the podium of the Grand National Assembly and began speaking in Hebrew. This was the first time an Israeli leader had addressed the legislature of any Muslim country.

“Turkey instills trust,” Peres told the hushed hall. “I came here to express my gratitude to Turkey.”

Instilling trust has become Turkey’s global mission. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a visionary group of Turkish leaders led their country into the world. They not only broke out of the shell within which Turks had been hiding for generations, but drew on unique historical, geographic, cultural, and political assets to turn Turkey into a highly promising new player on the global scene.

Turkey has been a political and military ally of the United States for more than half a century. This relationship has not been free of trouble, but it has always fit the needs of the moment. The longest moment was the cold war, and during that period the two countries’ strategic needs meshed well. The United States wanted allies who fully embraced its basic foreign policy principles. Turkey was a reliable frontline state in the confrontation with Soviet power.

In every other way, though, Turkey was a country on the periphery. It was near the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, North Africa, and the Slavic world, but not part of any of them. Partly by its own choice and partly as a result of that era’s political geography, Turkey was a cold war outlier, a strategic afterthought with no distinct role in the world or even its own region.

After giving itself what one scholar has called a “historical lobotomy,” the Republic of Turkey spent three-quarters of a century denying and hiding from its Ottoman past, when the Turks ruled a vast empire that spread from Algiers to Mecca to Budapest. That may have made sense; Turkey had urgent challenges at home, did not want to be seen as neo-imperialist, and embraced Western security goals as its own.

Since the end of the cold war, few countries have so completely redesigned their approach to the world.

On the new world map, Turkey is no longer on the edge of anything. Instead it is once again what this piece of geography has been since time immemorial: the epicenter of the immense Eurasian landmass. The combination of Turkey's location, its Ottoman heritage, and its successful blend of Islam and democracy gives it enormous strategic potential. It is seizing that potential in ways that benefit not only itself, but also the United States and the West.

Turkey has taken on the role of mediator, conciliator, and arbitrator. The world urgently needs some country to play that role. Few are better equipped to do so than Turkey.

When Israel wished to begin secret talks with Syria, it asked Turkey to arrange them. After Sunnis in Iraq decided to boycott national elections, Turkey persuaded them to change their minds and participate. Whenever Turkish officials land in a bitterly divided country like Lebanon or Pakistan or Afghanistan, every faction is eager to talk to them. Turkey is working to calm tensions between Iran and the United States, between Syria and Iraq, between Armenia and Azerbaijan. No country's diplomats are as welcome in both Tehran and Washington, Moscow and Tbilisi, Damascus and Cairo. No other nation is respected by Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Taliban while also maintaining good ties with the Israeli, Lebanese, and Afghan governments.

"On the new world map, Turkey is no longer on the edge of anything. Instead it is once again what this piece of geography has been since time immemorial: the epicenter of the immense Eurasian landmass."

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's grand concept, which he calls "strategic depth," envisions Turkey as a hyperactive peacemaker. His first project was to resolve all of Turkey's disputes with its neighbors; in this he has been largely successful. His next ambition is grander, not just "zero problems with neighbors" but "zero problems *between* neighbors." Every dispute in Turkey's extended neighborhood, he argues, threatens peace and limits chances for regional development; all are therefore of urgent concern to Turkey.

For most of Turkey's modern history, the Muslim world has seen it as an apostate. Atatürk's reforms pulled it so far from Islam that it seemed to have no religious legitimacy. Besides, it was perceived as Washington's lackey, stigmatized by its embrace of American policies that many Muslims found abhorrent.

Neither of those objections applies to Turkey today. It is governed by pious Muslims and has its own foreign policy. Its leaders are warmly welcomed in many places where, in the past, they would not even have cared to visit.

Turkey has found remarkably little resistance to its new ambition. By intervening only when asked and maintaining good relations with such a wide range of governments and factions, it plays a role no other country can. It has unique credentials. Turkey is big – seventy million people with the largest economy in the Middle East. Its Ottoman past gives it enormous historical weight. It is also a highly alluring model, not just because of its relative prosperity but also because its society is so free.

The Lebanese scholar Fares Braizat spoke for many Middle East intellectuals when he called Turkey “a role model that has successfully balanced tradition and modernization.” Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, admires Turkey as “a model on the way to democracy.” Sedat Laçiner, an influential adviser to the Turkish foreign ministry who runs a think tank in Ankara, goes even further. “Problems like Palestine, the occupation of Iraq, Chechnya, Afghanistan and the occupation of Karabakh by the Armenians have created a great hopelessness,” he asserts. “The majority of Muslim people do not trust their own governments to solve their political, economic and social problems. They need to see a miracle – and Turkey is the miracle they need to see.”

Turkey has escaped from America’s orbit. In the language of geostrategists, the two countries have become “decoupled.” Turkey’s new role, however, holds great promise for the United States. As a Muslim country intimately familiar with the region around it, Turkey can go places, engage partners, and make deals that America cannot. What it has done to separate itself from the United States –refusing to allow American troops to invade Iraq from Turkish territory, for example, or denouncing Israel’s actions in Gaza– has enhanced its reputation in other Muslim countries. That strengthens its ability to influence them.

Turkey’s foreign policy, though independent, reinforces America’s. 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.

Both countries want to see a peaceful, democratic Iraq; a moderate Iran that does not threaten its neighbors; an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; a stable Middle East free of radical forces; a weakening of religious fundamentalism; a coordinated global anti- terror strategy; a pipeline network that brings oil and gas to the West without the danger of political or economic blackmail; an end to “frozen conflicts” from Cyprus to Kashmir; stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and genuine

independence for the nations of the South Caucasus. Not only does Turkey share these American goals, it is well placed to help achieve them.

“Turkey’s new search for independence in its foreign policy, however complicating or irritating for the United States, will nonetheless serve the best interests of Turkey, the Middle East, and even the West,” the former CIA analyst Graham Fuller has concluded. “The Muslim world is in search of a leader. In view of its present leadership deficit –there is hardly a single leader who commands broad respect across the region– Turkey is being listened to more carefully as an increasingly respected, independent and successful Muslim voice... Enlightened American observers will come to appreciate the presence of this new Turkey, strengthened and rooted in democratic process, as an anchor of stability in the troubled and tempestuous region of the Middle East.”

Around the same time Fuller wrote those words, the American strategic prognosticator George Friedman published a study called *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century*. “When we look at the wreckage of the Islamic world after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and consider what country must be taken seriously in the region, it seems obvious that it must be Turkey,” he wrote. Accompanying his prediction was a map of the Middle East, North Africa, and southeastern Europe captioned “Turkish Sphere of Influence 2050.” It looks strikingly like a map of the Ottoman Empire.

Under other circumstances, Egypt, Pakistan, or Iraq might have emerged to lead the Muslim world. Their societies, however, are weak, fragmented, and decomposing. Indonesia is a more promising candidate, but it has no historic tradition of leadership and is far from the center of Muslim crises. That leaves Turkey – which, by happy coincidence, is eager to play this role.

Although Turkey is on its way to becoming one of the world’s indispensable powers, it still has one important hurdle to leap. Having resolved nearly all of its international disputes, it must now finish putting its domestic house in order. Turkish law still limits freedom of speech. The military still plays a role in politics that is unacceptable in a democratic country. Minorities are still less than fully protected – not just Kurds, whose culture was brutalized by decades of official repression before Prime Minister Erdoğan persuaded the Grand National Assembly to restore many of their rights in 2009, but also Christians, non-mainstream Muslims, and unbelievers. A streak of chauvinistic nationalism still runs through Turkey’s political culture. The press is weak and corrupted. Political parties are closed autocracies. The education system is rigid and discourages free thinking. Until Turkish democracy is made whole, its ability to serve as a beacon of freedom will be limited.

Some of the other drags on Turkish power are technical; its diplomats are renowned for their sophistication, for example, but there are barely one thousand of them, hardly enough to carry their country's message around the world. Other challenges come in the form of rival nations. Turkish leaders like to say that their goals conflict with no one else's, but that is never true for an ambitious country. When Turkey encourages Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan to claim their full independence, it irritates Moscow. When it rallies to the defense of Chinese Muslims, it challenges Beijing. As Turkey's global reach grows, it must learn to manage these conflicts and assure that they do not grow into confrontations.

The Turks are emotional people, and this poses another challenge because emotion is the enemy of sound foreign policy. Turkish leaders have at times allowed emotion to affect their attitude toward Israel. They are understandably angry over Israel's actions in occupied territories, especially the destruction wrought in Gaza by its 2008–9 invasion and the punishing blockade that followed. If Turkey is to be a bridge among nations, though, it cannot afford gratuitously to alienate any. The United States has brought itself much grief by isolating Iran; it would be just as foolish for Turkey to reject Israel. Like Iran, Israel is a pariah in many circles and is frozen out of Middle East security arrangements. This is bad for all parties. Pushing Israel into a corner, or making Israel feel that it is alone and friendless, does not serve the cause of peace. Turkey has a history of excellent relations with Jews, and in 1949 it became the second Muslim country –after Iran– to recognize Israel. Turning its back on that legacy would contradict its new diplomatic role as a broker of compromise.

This drift, however, does not disqualify Turkey as a uniquely valuable partner for the United States. Nor does its new focus on the Middle East and Asia. By widening its policy sweep, Turkey strengthens its geopolitical appeal.

Americans have come to realize that they lack some of the historical and cultural tools necessary to navigate effectively through the Middle East and surrounding regions. They need a guide. Turkey is their best choice. As the United States shapes and carries out its policies toward Muslim countries, it should do so with Turkey at its side.

But is the United States, so long accustomed to acting on its own, ready to be guided? A successful partnership requires partners to listen to each other, accept each other's counsel, and adapt to each other's needs. The Turks may be ready for this kind of relationship with the United States, but America has little experience in listening to other powers. Shattering events of the last decade, however –including the September 11 attacks, the bloody aftermath of the Iraq invasion, the daunting challenges emerging from Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the emergence

of global terror networks— have shaken Americans’ sunny “can-do” mentality. For the first time in their history, they see that there are some things in the world they cannot achieve by themselves, no matter how determined they are or how much money they spend. Many now realize that they need help in understanding and resolving global crises. If they accept this truth, and if they agree that the place they most need help is the Muslim world, Turkey becomes America’s next best friend.

Why has Turkey turned away from its traditional foreign policy, which was based on relations with Europe and the United States, and become so much more active in the Middle East and Asia? It has matured as a country and now has the self-confidence to play a global role; the end of the cold war has freed it from a policy straitjacket and given it the chance to pursue broader interests; it sees a wide range of political and economic opportunities and wants to seize them. Another reason, however, underlies all of these. Europe is slamming its door in Turkey’s face. Turkey, a proud country that does not react well to insults, is responding by seeking friends elsewhere.

The romance between Turkey and Europe, never passionate, has cooled decidedly. Officially the consummation is still just a matter of time. How much time, though, is now quite unclear. Some European leaders have directly contradicted the European Union’s promise to Turkey –that it is “a candidate state destined to join the Union” – by asserting that they do not want Turkey ever to join. As Europe’s change of heart became painfully evident during the first decade of the new century, the pace of reform in Turkey slowed. That, in turn, gave Europeans more reason to criticize Turkey. This downward spiral has hurt both sides.

It is bad for Turkey because the EU has for years been the principal outside force pushing Turkey to complete its march toward democracy. Turkey has its own reasons to broaden minority rights, lift restrictions on free speech, and end military influence in politics. The prospect of EU membership, though, gave it an especially powerful incentive to do so. As that prospect has faded, so has the pressure for reform.

Turkey needs the power of Europe to maximize its strategic clout. With Europe behind it, Turkey can help reshape the world. Without Europe it can increase its influence, but its power will remain limited.

Europe also suffers from this breach. With Turkey as a member, the European Union can become a major world power; without Turkey it has less chance. Turkey is a vibrant country full of young people eager to work and pay the taxes that will fill the pension funds of graying European countries. Most important, Turkey is Europe’s best hope to calm radicalism in the Islamic world, which threatens

Europe as it does every other region. By admitting Turkey, the EU would send a clear message to Muslim countries: if you become democratic, the world is open to you. By rejecting Turkey, it sends the opposite message: we don't want you, no matter what you do.

"Should Turkey join the EU, then this will have a profound effect on the entire Muslim world and on the Arab world in particular," the Moroccan commentator Abdullah Turkmani has written. "This process will contribute to their political and intellectual modernization. In the future, near or far, they will all be forced to imitate what Turkey is doing."

"Turkey's road to membership in the European Union is strewn with obstacles, some of them stemming from Europe's shortsightedness and others of Turkey's own making."

Not only Arabs but Muslims everywhere place great hope in the Turkey-EU relationship. "Turkey, as a model of tradition and modernity, draws a lot of attention from intellectuals, politicians and policymakers in Pakistan and other Muslim states," asserts the Pakistani scholar Rasul Bakhsh Rais. "The formal, institutional integration of Turkey with Europe will strengthen secular democratic forces in Muslim states that are locked in a struggle with traditional Islamist groups for defining the identity of states and societies in the modern world."

Given these advantages of embracing Turkey, why has the EU lost so much of its enthusiasm for the idea? Part of the answer is that ordinary Europeans were never keen on it. The EU has always been an elite project, and now that its citizens are slowly gaining some say in its decisions, they are expressing their unhappiness with the idea of Turkish membership. Many believe that a Muslim country has no place in the EU; others fear the cost of future European subsidies to Turkey; still others are overcome with "enlargement fatigue" after admitting so many other countries to the EU in recent years. Politicians in some European countries have realized there are votes to be gained by promising to keep Turkey out of the EU. That may change, but not overnight. Until it does, Turkey has little prospect of joining.

Given this reality, Turkey is looking elsewhere. It would probably be seeking to broaden its horizons in any case, but Europe's unfriendliness gives it another reason to do so. That has led some to fear that Turkey, stung by Europe's insults, is trading its Western orientation for a different one.

President Barack Obama addressed that fear when he spoke to the Grand National Assembly in 2009, making Turkey the first Muslim country he visited after taking office. He strongly restated American support for Turkish membership in the EU, asserting that Turkey “has been a resolute ally and a responsible partner in transatlantic and European institutions” and that “Turkish membership would broaden and strengthen Europe’s foundation.” Then he addressed “those who like to debate Turkey’s future.”

“They wonder whether you will be pulled in one direction or another,” Obama said. “But I believe here is what they don’t understand: Turkey’s greatness lies in your ability to be at the center of things. This is not where East and West divide. This is where they come together.”

Turkey’s road to membership in the European Union is strewn with obstacles, some of them stemming from Europe’s shortsightedness and others of Turkey’s own making. Perhaps Turkey will be admitted by 2023, when it celebrates its hundredth year of existence as a sovereign state. In the meantime, though, Turkey can help the United States achieve some of its most urgent goals. President Obama mentioned one –arguably the most urgent– in his speech to the Grand National Assembly.

“We share the goal of a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors,” he told his Turkish hosts. “The United States and Turkey can help the Palestinians and Israelis make this journey.”

America’s long-term strategic interests coincide with Turkey’s. Each country has its own set of tools with which it can promote those interests. That alone would be enough to make this a promising partnership. But there is more.

These countries are also well suited to each other for a second reason: their people share a democratic approach to politics and life. The Turks have internalized democratic values that Americans also embrace: human rights, free elections, and the right of people to live their lives as they wish. Democracy has become so entrenched in Turkey that even military coups have been unable to shake it. The Turks understand that they can only progress by moving ever closer to Western ideas of modernity and freedom.

An ideal partnership between countries is based on two foundations. First, the two countries must share strategic goals. Second, their societies must share values, because partnerships based only on relations between ruling elites are inherently unstable. On both counts, Turkey qualifies as the best partner the United States can find in the world’s most troubled region.