

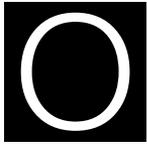
# TPQ ROUNDTABLE: SHIFTING TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

*In this article, the author highlights some of the topics central to the debates that took place during the first leg of the two-day TPQ Roundtable marathon organized with the support of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation. Focusing on the insights provided by the event's panel discussants, the article presents a brief analysis of the potential implications of Turkey's recent, assertive foreign policies.*

**Benjamin Katcher\***



\* Benjamin Katcher is a Research Fellow at the New America Foundation in Washington, D.C. He is also a Visiting Fellow at Bahçeşehir University's School of Government and Leadership.



n 25 November 2010, *Turkish Policy Quarterly* hosted a roundtable discussion in Istanbul entitled “Shifting Turkish Foreign Policy: A Challenge for the Transatlantic Alliance?” The convening, which was part of Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation-funded roundtable series, brought together journalists, diplomats, and policy analysts to reflect on NATO’s biannual summit in Lisbon, at which the Alliance approved its New Strategic Concept and agreed to develop a common missile-defense system.

*Hürriyet Daily News* & Economic Review Associate Editor Barçın Yinanç moderated the discussion, which featured three speakers: Heritage Foundation Senior Research Fellow Ariel Cohen; *Star* Daily Columnist Gürkan Zengin; and *Habertürk* Columnist and Kadir Has University lecturer Soli Özel.

The panelists tackled a number of issues, including: the role of political Islam and anti-Western ideology in Turkey’s foreign policy, Ankara’s European Union membership negotiations, and Turkey’s increased emphasis on relations with its eastern and southern neighbors.

### ***The Basis of Turkey’s Foreign Policy***

First, the speakers debated the extent to which Turkey’s foreign policy can be attributed to a tilt toward policies guided by Islamist ideology. Ariel Cohen raised concerns that the ruling AKP’s (Justice and Development Party) conservative, religious roots have led it to adopt anti-Israeli policies and develop close relations with Muslim countries and non-state actors such as Iran and Hamas. Soli Özel and Gürkan Zengin, on the other hand, insisted that structural changes in the international system and Turkey’s strategic interests are more salient causes of Turkey’s recent diplomacy. They noted that Turkey remains committed to the West and NATO, and that it has improved relations with non-Muslim countries such as Russia. Özel explained that Turkey’s security and economic interests provide the AKP with “plausible deniability” when accused of pursuing an ideological agenda.

Cohen responded that Turkey’s foreign policy would be perceived differently if it were not tinted by Islamist and illiberal domestic policies such as: an attempt to criminalize adultery, the headscarf debate, and the “dismantling of the pillars of secularism.” He added that the American and Turkish governments should acknowledge the importance of the “shared values” the two countries enjoyed prior to the AKP’s promotion of anti-Western policies since its emergence in 2002.

The term “shared values” is often invoked by Western leaders and analysts with regard to Turkey, but it is rarely used to refer to the level of Turkey’s democratization. After all, the AKP’s predecessors were hardly flawless democrats. Instead,

Western policymakers and analysts often use the term to distinguish whether countries –in this case Turkey– adopt reflexively pro-Western positions on issues of international import and view the West sympathetically. During the Cold War, American leaders trusted that they could overcome disagreements with Turkey because of the leadership’s fundamental support for and aspirations to become a part of the West. Today, Americans, Europeans, and certainly Israelis are less confident that the AKP is similarly disposed.

The Turkish public’s growing distrust of the West has exacerbated these fears. According to the 2010 Pew Global Attitudes Project, only 17 percent of Turks view the United States favorably and only 23 percent hold a favorable view of President Obama.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the EU’s favorability rating among Turks plunged from 58 percent to 28 percent from 2004-2010.<sup>2</sup>

Tied to questions surrounding Turkey’s Western identity are concerns about the fate of its European Union accession negotiations. In response to these concerns, Zengin insisted that Turkey will continue to liberalize according to the European Union criteria and blamed French and German opposition for the lack of progress in recent years. Conversely, one of the audience members suggested that the AKP was not really interested in EU integration and that the process would likely end if the party wins the next parliamentary elections in July 2011.

Given Europe’s economic difficulties, longstanding objections to Turkey’s membership within the Union and the persistence of the Cyprus dispute there is plenty of reason to be skeptical that Turkey will join the EU any time soon. For example, the EU declined to open a new chapter in the accession negotiations or to hold new talks during Belgium’s EU presidency from July-December 2010, the first six-month period since negotiations began in 2005 in which a new chapter was not opened.<sup>3</sup> President Abdullah Gül has also raised the possibility that Turkey could eventually choose to opt-out of the Union. He suggested, “Maybe Turkish people would say, ‘although we concluded the accession process successfully, let us not be a member.’”<sup>4</sup>

It appears, however, that all sides have an interest in keeping the accession talks alive for the foreseeable future. The process provides the AKP with domestic and

---

<sup>1</sup> “Obama More Popular Abroad Than At Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit,” *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, 17 June 2010, <http://pewglobal.org/2010/06/17/obama-more-popular-abroad-than-at-home/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Turks Downbeat about Their Institutions,” *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, 7 September 2010, <http://pewglobal.org/2010/09/07/turks-downbeat-about-their-institutions/>

<sup>3</sup> Toby Vogel, “Talks Called off as Turkey’s EU Bid Loses Momentum,” *European Voice*, 9 December 2010, <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/imported/talks-called-off-as-turkey-s-eu-bid-loses-momentum/69658.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> “President Gül Says Turkey May Join Ranks of BRIC Countries,” *Today’s Zaman*, 10 November 2010, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-226804-president-gul-says-turkey-may-join-ranks-of-bric-countries.html>

international legitimacy; at the same time, an unsuccessful end to the negotiations would damage Brussels' credibility. Therefore, like the endless peace process in the Levant, the parties may continue to negotiate even in the absence of significant progress.

### ***Turkey's Strategic Choices (or Non-Choices)***

Another common theme that carried through the program was the question of choice (or lack thereof). Turkey's growing regional and international profile is due in part to its ability to avoid taking sides in regional and international disputes. According to Zengin, Turkey can improve ties with Russia, Syria and Iran, criticize Israel, and maintain its friendly relations with the United States and Western European countries. But as Turkey becomes increasingly influential, it will eventually be compelled to make those choices that it has thus far managed to avoid.

*"The term 'shared values' is often invoked by Western leaders and analysts with regard to Turkey, but it is rarely used to refer to the level of Turkey's democratization."*

This reluctance was on display in the weeks prior to the NATO summit in Lisbon with regard to NATO's missile defense system proposal. Turkey ultimately agreed to participate despite its public reservations about alienating Iran, the distribution of the shield's costs, and the decision-making process related to the system's activation.

The speakers debated whether Turkey's assent constituted a strategic shift back toward the West or a tactical adjustment to deflect attention from recent high-profile disagreements with its NATO partners over relations with Is-

rael and Iran. Özel suggested it was a strategic shift; Cohen argued it was a mere tactical maneuver; and Zengin insisted that Turkey's policy had been pro-Western along; therefore the decision at Lisbon was no shift at all. The speakers' divergent interpretations reflect broader disagreements.

Zengin views Turkey's foreign policy activism as the natural product of the country's recent political stability and economic successes. Disagreements among friends are inevitable and should not be overemphasized. It is more significant that Turkey and the West share a vision of a peaceful, prosperous regional order that is not prone to radicalism. Turkey's decision to sign on to the missile defense shield demonstrates the endurance of Turkey's Western orientation.

In contrast, Cohen believes that the Turkish political leadership is fundamentally anti-Western. While Turkey claims to engage with its neighbors to promote regional peace and stability, it is in fact supporting elements such as Iran and Hamas that are enemies of the United States, Europe, and Israel. Turkey's handling of the missile-defense issue underscores its loyalties. Turkey only agreed to join after it received assurances that Israel could not benefit from the shield's radars and that Iran –widely considered the shield's primary object– would not be singled out as a threat.

Özel suggested that structural factors have led Turkey to move away from the West since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but that the decision in Lisbon was an acknowledgment that Turkey continues to need and want its partnership with the West.

To this writer, Turkey's approach to the Lisbon Summit seemed a little like a friend who exaggerates the costs associated with a small favor to demonstrate how good of a friend he is. It would have made little sense for Ankara to oppose the plan given its intention to develop a national missile defense system and its proximity to Iran, Syria, and other countries seeking to improve their offensive missile capabilities.

Turkey's attempts to balance relations between Israel and Iran and between Armenia and Azerbaijan raise questions about its ability to avoid making difficult choices. As many analysts have pointed out, it is difficult to maintain friendly relations with all of your neighbors when those neighbors have serious disagreements among themselves. Events over the past two years may indicate that Turkey's motto should be “zero problems with neighbors other than Israel.”

Ankara's relations with Jerusalem began to deteriorate well before the Mavi Marmara incident of 31 May 2010 and are unlikely to improve in the near-term. A hostile posture toward Israel may be a prerequisite for respect on the Arab Street and positive relations with Iran and Hamas, but it will likely complicate Turkey's ties to the United States, Europe, and other regional actors. It also undermines Turkey's ability to serve as a regional mediator. For example, Turkey facilitated secret negotiations between Israel and Syria in 2008, but is unlikely to do so again unless it regains Israel's trust.

The international diplomacy surrounding Iran's nuclear program may be the issue on which Turkey is compelled to make its most difficult decision. The West's strategy of pressuring Iran through economic and diplomatic isolation is fundamentally incompatible with Turkey's burgeoning commercial relationship with the Islamic Republic. Turkey plausibly insists that sanctions are counter-productive and that

only diplomatic engagement can persuade the Iranians to refrain from developing nuclear weapons. After voting against sanctions at the Security Council, Turkey has agreed to abide by those sanctions; however, Ankara has rebuffed U.S. requests to impose additional sanctions and continues to insist that it wishes to engage with, rather than isolate, the Iranian economy. Meanwhile, the failure of the P5+1 meeting in Istanbul in January 2011 has left Western countries even more pessimistic about the strategy of engagement that Turkey has championed.

Ankara's refusal to toe the Western line on Iran policy is a source of friction between Turkey and its transatlantic partners and has the potential to obstruct cooperation in other areas. For example, President Obama reportedly warned Prime Minister Erdoğan in August 2010 that Congress may not approve arms sales to Turkey because of its policies toward Israel and Iran.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Turkey's Growing International Assertiveness***

Finally, each of the speakers addressed how structural shifts in the international environment combined with Turkey's recent political and economic liberalization have provided opportunities for a more assertive foreign policy. As Cohen noted, coping with the rapid emergence of "the Pacific Rim plus India" is a significant geopolitical challenge to the West. While the United States and Europe view Asia's rise primarily as a threat to its dominant position, Turkey is drawn to the economic opportunities associated with the rapid economic growth to its east.

Turkey is at an economic disadvantage because of its enormous external energy dependence, which leads to large trade deficits with Russia and Iran. This problem is compounded by the fact that Turkey also suffers from trade deficits with the European Union and the United States, which together accounted for 46 percent of Turkey's global trade in 2008.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Turkey enjoys trade surpluses with developing economies in the Middle East and Central Asia, including Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Israel, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.<sup>7</sup> Increasing commercial ties with countries with which Turkey enjoys favorable balances of trade can help alleviate the country's chronic trade deficits.

---

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Dombey, "U.S Warns Turkey on Iran and Israel," *Financial Times*, 15 August 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/35d01e4e-a895-11df-86dd-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1CcZU7mtU>.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmet Evin, Kemal Kirişçi, Ronald Linden, Thomas Straubhaar, Nathalie Tocci, Juliette Tolay, and Joshua Walker, "Getting to Zero: Turkey, Its Neighbors, and the West," Transatlantic Academy Report, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Turkey's economic ambitions were on display during a recent meeting in Ankara between Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan and Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. Following the meeting, Erdoğan announced that the two leaders set a goal of increasing trade between the two countries from the current level of 14.2 billion dollars per year to 50 billion dollars in 2015 and 100 billion dollars in 2020.

Until recently, the United States has supported most economic integration as a positive development likely to promote global stability and prosperity. But persistent economic weakness in both the United States and Europe coupled with China's emergence as a potential peer competitor may lead to greater economic competition between the North-Atlantic and East Asian states. If this scenario plays out, Turkey may again be forced to make some difficult choices concerning its commercial priorities.

### **Conclusion**

In recent years, Washington, Paris, and Berlin have struggled to bring leverage to bear over Ankara on foreign policy issues. This is not because Turkey no longer needs the West. Turkey enjoys protection under the NATO nuclear umbrella, relies on the United States to arm its military, and conducts approximately half of its trade with Europe.

Turkey's importance to ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Iranian nuclear issue, and the West's troubled relations with Muslim populations have preserved Turkey's importance to the West and allowed the foundations of the transatlantic partnership to remain despite disagreements over Iran and Israel. Turkey's leaders appear to believe that they can cooperate selectively with the United States and Europe and continue to enjoy the benefits they accrue from those partnerships. Thus far, Turkey's transatlantic allies seem unsure how to respond.

*"Each of the speakers addressed how structural shifts in the international environment combined with Turkey's recent political and economic liberalization have provided opportunities for a more assertive foreign policy."*