

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East region is undergoing its most difficult time in this century. Iraq's invasion has indeed caused widespread repercussions. The failure of efforts between Turkey and Iran to come to terms with one another in leading the developments in the region on a peaceful co-existence of different sects resulted in an increased polarization of the region. Turkey's growing involvement in Syria together with the US and some Western partners, helped to generate a counter-bloc comprised of Iran, Russia, and China. When considered with their supporters in Iraq and Syria this is indeed a strong bloc. One may say there is a new cold war in the making in the Middle East. Much has been said, written, and speculated about the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), but it is clear that it will take a huge effort to uproot it from the lands it has occupied. It is a common perception in the international community that the AKP government assisted al-Nusra and ISIL and that Gulf funding was used in this process. This has caused considerable consternation not only in Syria but also in Iraq, and certainly in Iran and Russia. In this article, the author argues that Turkish foreign policy in the region has been on a downward slide since the AKP government gradually dispensed with secular principles. Today, the credibility of Turkish foreign policy has hit rock bottom in the region.

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TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Fall 2014

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The Middle East region is undergoing its most difficult time in this century. The shape it will take will have profound effects on international affairs. Iraq and Syria are at the epicenter of tumultuous developments in this region.

The United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 has indeed caused widespread repercussions. Not only did it result in a deeply disgruntled Sunni community but also a revanchist Shiite ruling class that turned a blind eye to Sunni demands in fear of the return of the old Baathists to power. This resulted in the stepping in of radical Islamist groups on behalf of the Sunnis. The latest and the most vicious of these groups is the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The huge number of internally or externally displaced persons who had very little left to lose and their coalition with such radical groups brought about a phenomenon by the name of the “Islamic State” straddling over lands of Syria and Iraq. Now an international coalition has been formed to fight this phenomenon.



There is no doubt that the mismanagement by the US of developments in Iraq following the invasion resulted in what we face today. The decision to withdraw from Iraq by leaving it in the hands of a prime minister prone to rule the country on a sectarian agenda with an iron fist – as exemplified by his decisions to quell protests with disproportionate use of force, resulting in the deaths of thousands – brought us to where we are now in Iraq. In the meantime Iran was able to consolidate its power through its affiliated groups in Iraq. Today, Iran is fighting ISIL with its Al-Quds force, as well as militia groups such as Asaib al Ahl-al Haq.

One should keep in mind that the failure of efforts between Turkey and Iran to come to terms with one another in leading the developments in the region based on a peaceful co-existence of different sects has resulted in an increased polarization of the region. Turkey started to gradually identify with the cause of the Sunnis and distanced itself from the secular credentials of the Republic. This was the choice of the AKP government in Turkey, whereas Iran wanted to seize the opportunity to increase its hegemony in the region.

The Perception of the Government's Neo-Ottomanism among the Arab Masses and its Consequences

The so-called neo-Ottomanism of the AKP government raised eyebrows both in the East and the West. One could see that Arabs detested the idea. Arab nationalists were furious. The same was true for Iran. Turkey's increasing involvement in Syria together with the US and some Western partners helped form a counter-bloc comprised of Iran, Russia, and China. When considered with their supporters in Iraq and Syria this is indeed a strong bloc. One may say there is a new cold war in the making in the Middle East.

ISIL

Much has been said, written, and speculated about ISIL, but it is clear that it will take a huge effort to uproot it from the lands it has occupied. Those who are familiar with the surge strategy of the US at the time of the sectarian war in 2006-7 and the setting up of the Awakening Councils, would admit that the present effort to train and equip Sunni tribes together with air strikes will have to be reinforced considerably by ground forces to make a difference on the ground.

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It is a common perception in the international community that the AKP government assisted al-Nusra and ISIL and that Gulf funding was used in this process. This has caused considerable consternation not only in Syria but also in Iraq, and certainly in Iran and Russia. Another blunder was the strong support accorded to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Turkish government identified itself with the Muslim Brotherhood, which has caused it to damage its ties with Saudi Arabia and some Gulf countries. All in all one may say that Turkish foreign policy in the region has been on a downward slide since the AKP government gradually dispensed with secular principles. Today, the credibility of Turkey has hit rock bottom in the region.

Relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

Turkey's relations with the KRG were the only relationship that Turkey could maintain at a very good level even after the adverse effects of its policies in Syria.

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However, this relationship also took a downward turn following the attacks of ISIL on the KRG. It was voiced in some circles of the Turkish government that the KRG would be considered under the security umbrella of Turkey if it were to be attacked by a foe. The KRG was indeed attacked by ISIL, but military assistance came rather late according to KRG officials.

Today, although the top leadership of the KRG continues to support this relationship with Turkey, it has also been the policy of the KRG to give weight to its relations with Iran. One may say that the KRG has adopted a more balanced approach between Turkey and Iran while strengthening its ties with the members of the international coalition. It is reported that there has been a considerable change of heart among Iraqi Kurds against the Turkish government’s policy.

The attacks on Kobani by ISIL on the other hand – and the AKP government’s position on Kobani – were another turning point in the course of events in the region. The Kurdish citizens of Turkey were extremely upset by the hands-off policy of their government, and in turn, by the abandonment of the Kobani Kurds’ in their struggle against ISIL. They were further infuriated that Turkey was seen as one of the countries helping ISIL become as strong as it is. The protests that ensued in Turkey not only reflected that anger against the government, but also displayed the relationship between the so-called peace process in Turkey and the plight of Kurds in Kobani.

The PKK, in the meantime, entered the foray in hopes of changing its status as a terrorist organization, as it came to the rescue when *Peshmerga* forces were retreating from some neighborhoods attacked by ISIL in Iraq.

One can safely say that ISIL has complicated an already very complex region. The recruitment of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq by ISIL will likely increasingly become the main source of conflict between Sunni tribes and ISIL terrorists in the future. Further, ISIL’s ramifications go well beyond the Middle East as it recruits members from all over Europe. It is reported that the Balkans are also becoming one of the main sources of its membership.

Moderate Islam

Not long ago, Turkey was hailed as an example of “moderate Islam,” spreading its positive influence throughout the region. Western countries were appreciating the fact that Turkey was using its strategic depth in the East, whereas Arab countries were appreciating Turkey’s strategic depth in the West. Turkey’s bid for EU membership was very closely followed by the freedom and democracy-seeking masses of the Arab countries. The fact of the matter is that the AKP government was capitalizing on what the democratic secular republic had offered through its successes in its republican history by anchoring its own institutions to the value system of Europe. The level of economic development and modernity Turkey has reached was thanks to the secular system of governance and freedoms provided by democracy. Thus, the AKP built upon the legacy of the republic, taking steps to improve the political as well as economic climate – only to reverse these steps after 2011. Therefore, it promoted its own Islamic outlook in the region as if it were only the AKP’s achievement, without regard to the preceding successes achieved by other governments. This was promoted as the success of moderate Islam in Turkey. The motto was “Islam is compatible with democracy.” In the same vein, the Muslim Brotherhood was supported.

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In the end, the whole idea of moderate Islam failed, having left a totally polarized region with Sunni and Shiite terror groups at each other's throats under the guise of saving one sect from the other.

The region is a mess. Apart from building an international coalition to fight ISIL, it seems that not only is a holistic strategy lacking, but also the capacity to implement a strategy even if there were one is in short supply.

What Next?

Turkey has to find a way out, not only to thwart the threats directed at its peace and order, but also to lay the groundwork for peace and tranquility in the region.

The first and foremost of all rights is the right to life. The human suffering at the hand of the terror groups in Iraq and Syria has to come to an end.

International efforts are underway to stop the carnage of ISIL. Turkey should give every support to this coalition short of sending ground troops into Syria or Iraq. Turkish soldiers, especially after AKP's attempts to implement a neo-Ottomanist policy, would not be welcome in the region. However, assistance could be given that may help undo the perception that Turkey has been supporting Sunni terrorist groups in Syria. Turkey should limit its efforts only to the fight against ISIL. ISIL should be ousted from not only Kobani but also Tal Afar, so that the Turcoman can also safely return to their homes. The same is true for Sinjar, to help Yazidis to return to their homes.

The fight against ISIL is certainly a priority. However, winning this war is no easy task unless Sunni tribes are willing to fight and provide human intelligence as well.

The AKP government should stop its rhetoric on the necessity to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The international community should find common ground for a transitional government in Syria, so that internecine fighting comes to a halt. A political understanding needs to be reached first. Russia and Iran should also be parties to this effort for peace to hold in that country.

The second important principle is to preserve the safety of all our citizens. The Turkish government's choice of policy to topple Assad as a priority had grave consequences for Turkey. The support given to foreign fighters resulted in more fighting, more suffering, and the displacement of millions of people from their homes in Syria and Iraq. Turkey had to accept around two million refugees owing partly to

its own policy. One may say that Turkey is faced with the consequences of its own doing. At the beginning, the government turned down calls for international aid and refused the entry of international aid institutions into refugee-camps to hide its activities from being observed by the international community. Now that the funding of Saudi Arabia and Qatar has come to an end the Turkish government is desperately asking for help.

One other extremely important aspect is the security risk created by allowing foreign terrorists to pass through Turkey into Syria. Through this policy the Turkish government allowed Syria to face the hardships Pakistan faces today. Apart from the sleeper cells inside Turkey, it is likely there are active groups that can wreak havoc in metropolitan centers. While the government is saying it is taking every measure to stop the flow of such terrorists, it continues to implement an “open door policy” with Syria. This remains to be

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a major setback in the fight against terrorists in Turkey. This also contradicts the government’s so-called EU membership objectives, as the EU would never grant Turkey a limited free visa regime unless Turkey’s visa regime is aligned with that of the EU. Turkish policy has to be reversed in this regard.

When we look at Turkey’s neighborhood, the AKP started with the motto of “zero problems with neighbors” and ended up with “intractable problems with all neighbors.” There is no way the AKP government can possibly rebuild confidence with Iran, Iraq, or Syria. The sectarian policies it has espoused caused irreparable damage to our relations with these neighbors.

The policy of “moderate Islam” has failed completely. The success of the Nida Tunis party in Tunisia, where the Arab Spring started, has set an example of utmost importance regarding the choice of the Arab people for freedoms and democracy under a secular system. People in MENA countries should be totally free in practicing their religion, and respect for different beliefs and sects should replace the suppression of members of other sects. Western countries should change their policies of supporting “moderate Islam” to that of supporting secular democracies in the MENA region.

Once the reign of the terrorist ISIL is brought under control and the Sunni tribes succeed in taking charge of their destiny, new international programs to reward those countries that show the political will to strengthen their democracies in the MENA region should be developed and tailor-made to meet the exigencies of the present conditions in the region. EU programs may indeed take the lead; the international community could support this effort. Turkey should genuinely return to its policy of giving priority to its EU membership. The justice system and freedoms, in particular the freedom of the press, should be aligned with that of the EU if Turkey is ever to become a beacon for democracy and contribute to peace and stability in the region. Turkey should also synchronize its policy *vis-à-vis* the Kurds in Iraq and Syria. One cannot support relations with Kurds in Iraq and leave the Kurds in Syria at the hands of ISIL. This is not an integrated policy. One other condition for peace to prevail is for regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as Turkey, to limit their interventions in Iraq and Syria to only positive contributions to the peoples at large rather than to support their affiliated groups or foreign fighters in these countries.

There is a long way to go to get rid of ISIL and the like from the region and reach a political solution to problems in Syria as well as Iraq. The fact of the matter is that Turkey can positively contribute to efforts in the region only if a new foreign policy is implemented under secular principles.