

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: TELLING STYLE FROM SUBSTANCE

On 29 January 2009, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stormed out of a debate with Israeli President Shimon Peres at the Davos World Economic Forum. With an impassioned Peres defending Israel's offensive in Gaza and an outraged Erdoğan accusing him of "knowing well how to kill people" and, having been cut off by the moderator, vowing never to return to Davos, the event certainly made for pretty good television. Contrary to what some commentators have alleged, however, it did not make for a watershed moment in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey remains anchored in the West – even if its recent policy vis-à-vis the near-abroad is more assertive and more autonomous than ever before.

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The second half of 2008 seemed to spell trouble on the domestic front for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). At the beginning of June, the Constitutional Court annulled a series of government-sponsored amendments that would have allowed women to wear headscarves in universities. On 30 July, the same Court declared the AKP "a hub of anti-secular activities" and slapped it with financial sanctions; the Party escaped outright banishment from politics by a single judge's vote. Symptoms of the economic crisis –rapid decline in growth, a weakening Lira and rising unemployment– began to appear shortly thereafter, accompanied by complaints that the government had not responded quickly enough to the global downturn. A series of corruption allegations, and a row with a media tycoon bent on making them stick, followed in the fall. By the end of 2008, the AKP's popularity had dipped below 30 percent –bad news for a party that had secured 47 percent of votes in parliamentary elections a year earlier.

Even its fiercest domestic opponents will admit, however, that on the international front the government has scored a number of important victories that have helped offset, at least to some extent, its domestic tribulations. Its record on foreign policy, in fact, has given the AKP an extra boost in time for the March Municipal Elections.

At the January World Economic Forum at Davos, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan struck gold. Angrily walking out of a panel debate –upset with both its host, David Ignatius (for cutting him off) and with Shimon Peres, the Israeli President (for Peres' finger-waggingz defense of Israel's shelling of Gaza)– Erdoğan returned home to a hero's welcome. A number of commentators complained that Erdoğan's behavior at Davos did not befit a statesman. Some called it a populist gimmick, timed to attract votes in the upcoming municipal elections– which, parenthetically, it did. The overwhelming majority of Turks, however, including most media outlets lined up squarely behind Erdoğan. Disappointed with the lack of a strong western response to the events in Gaza, Turks relished in the fact that their Prime Minister dared to speak truth to power.

There was also a psychological factor at stake. Taught that their proud country has all the makings of a major player on the international scene, Turks have often discovered, to their dismay, that Turkey mattered less to the outside world than they expected. Erdoğan's actions at Davos, however, reported the world over, vindicated the Turks: taking the central stage, speaking on behalf of the downtrodden, saying what no one else dared say, Turkey was finally getting the recognition it deserved.

The Arab press –just as the Arab public– was full of praise for Erdoğan. The “new Nasser”, as a number of Middle East commentators began to call him, had done more for Gaza than all the Arab leaders combined. “Turkey’s position on Gaza has been clear and crisp, in sharp contrast to our own regretful diplomatic paralysis,” read an editorial in the Beirut-based Daily Star.¹ Erdoğan, said Al-Ahram weekly in Egypt, “displayed dignity and singleness of mind. He did not mince his words. And, his speech, although cut short, was nevertheless as razor-sharp as a mediaeval Ottoman dagger.”² Finally, Syrian President Bashar al Assad acknowledged the extent of Erdoğan’s popularity in the Arab world when he told the Turkish Prime Minister that he, not Assad, was probably the most popular leader in Syria.

In the United States, however, the mood was quite different. Editorials bearing titles such as “Turkey’s turn from the West” or “Turkey’s new tilt” carried the day. Turkish policy during the Gaza bombing, several commentators argued, suggests that Turkey is turning away from Israel, NATO and the U.S., paying mere lip service to the EU, and drifting straight into the arms of Hamas, Syria and Iran.

Erdoğan’s spat with Peres and his government’s diplomacy during the war in Gaza might just be a turning point in the outside world’s *perception* of Turkish foreign policy. One thing it is not, however, is a turning point in Turkish foreign policy as such. Far from a paradigm shift, the Turkish response to the war in Gaza is part of a policy reorientation that has been taking place in Turkey since the beginning of the decade – a reorientation that has less to do with turning away from the West than with attuning Ankara’s foreign policy to the new reality of post-Cold War geopolitics, to the evolution of Turkish democracy, and to EU and U.S. policies in the region.

As for Erdoğan’s outburst itself, there is no need to mistake form (the Prime Minister’s emotional rhetoric) for substance (the continuing relationship between Ankara and Tel Aviv). Rather than a symptom of a sudden strategic realignment, the televised drama at Davos was the latest evidence –as if any more had been necessary– of the Turkish leader’s famously short temper and his equally troubling incapacity to handle criticism.

Towards a Multifaceted Foreign Policy

Throughout the Cold War years and well into the 1990s, Turkey’s foreign policy agenda and strategic orientation –as a loyal NATO member, a military power, and a western frontline state in a volatile but strategically important part of the

¹ Khalaf Ahmed Al Habtoor, “Turkey feels Palestine’s pain,” *The Daily Star*, 13 January 2009.

² *Al Ahram Weekly*, issue #933, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/933/_bah.htm, 5-11 February 2009.

world – was framed by the powerful military and the Kemalist establishment. Granted, several leaders tried to weaken the army's and the foreign ministry's hold over the policy-making apparatus in the 1990s. None have made significant headway in doing so, however. Tellingly, when Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan attempted to flip Turkish foreign policy on its head in 1996-97 (advocating a break with the West in favor of a stronger links with the Muslim world), he was first strong-armed by the army into signing an agreement with Israel and then, following a series of diplomatic debacles, forced to resign.

1999 marked a major shift in Turkey's relations with the outside world. Two tragic earthquakes – the first in the Turkish city of İzmit, the second across the Aegean, in Athens–generated an unprecedented outpouring of sympathy and support among Greeks and Turks, paving the way for a political rapprochement between historical foes. At the beginning of the year, Greece and Turkey had been on the brink of war; by its end, bilateral relations were taking place in the best atmosphere seen in decades. It was also in 1999 that Ankara's EU accession prospects received a monumental boost, with European leaders agreeing –at a summit in Helsinki– to grant Turkey the status of an EU candidate state. By anchoring Turkey to the EU accession process, the decision gave Ankara the confidence necessary to evolve in the direction of a more democratic, less hard security-oriented foreign policy. The arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, which took place earlier in the year, was also to have a similar impact.

It was the 2002 electoral triumph of the AKP, however, that consolidated the previous currents in Turkey's foreign policy, launching Ankara on course towards a more assertive and independent role in its neighborhood. Turkey should remain institutionally anchored in the West, the new government realized, but it should also forge new relations with the South and East, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by post-Cold War geopolitics. Such a philosophy had already taken root under Turkish leader Turgut Özal in the early 1990s. But it could only take flight when the AKP –equipped with a huge democratic mandate and the prospect of EU accession– arrived in power.

Several terms –“zero problems with neighbors”, “strategic depth” or “neo-Ottomanism”– have been used to describe Turkey's newfound appetite for engaging with its near-abroad, each of them accompanied by a substantial body of literature. Yet what the AKP's vision boils down to is the recognition that Turkey is, all at once, a European, Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country. These multiple regional identities, as well as Turkey's historical and cultural legacy, wrote the authors of the AKP's party program in 2002, “mandate us a foreign policy that is [...] multifaceted.” As then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül noted in 2005,

Turkey's goals are "to promote good neighborly relations with all, to replace disagreement with cooperation, to seek innovative mechanisms and channels to resolve regional conflicts, to encourage positive change in our region, and to build cross-cultural bridges of dialogue and understanding."

The U.S. and EU Factor

To a significant extent, the evolution of Turkish foreign policy since 2002 has also been conditioned by U.S. policies in the Middle East. The interests that bound Turkey and the U.S. during the Cold War have grown significantly weaker since the elimination of the Soviet threat. It was not until the Bush administration's interventionist policies in the Middle East, however, that Turkey was to find that many of its key regional aims –containment of ethnic strife and secure borders, among other things– have become incompatible with those of the U.S. This was to become clear in March 2003, when the Turkish parliament refused to heed Washington's call and voted against opening a northern front in the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In doing so, Turkey's elected representatives showed that concerns like domestic politics, public opinion, good neighborly relations, and regional stability were liable to take precedence over their country's strategic relationship with Washington. Seen in this context, Turkey's reaction to the Israeli war in Gaza also evinced a concern for stability – the fear, in other words, that the bloody campaign against Hamas could destabilize the region by pitting the outraged populations of the Arab states against their docile authoritarian leaders. Turkey's response to the war in Georgia –i.e., its reluctance to fall into line with a hard-line American policy *vis-à-vis* Russia– was to be another illustration of a shift in its strategic thinking. To Washington's consternation, Turkey, heavily dependent on Russian energy supplies, did not feel in any position to isolate, confront or otherwise antagonize Moscow. "Any other European country can follow certain isolationist policies against Russia. Can Turkey do this?" asked Ahmet Davutoğlu, an adviser to Erdoğan and the leading thinker on current Turkish foreign policy. "Unfortunately, we have to admit this fact."³

Bearing all of the above in mind, the U.S. will have to get used to, and learn to accommodate, an increasingly independent Turkish foreign policy. Even with a new administration in the White House, new disagreements between Washington and Ankara –on how best to deal with a nuclear Iran, a resurgent Russia and a factionalized Iraq– will be difficult to avoid.

As far as the EU is concerned, the picture is somewhat more complicated. On the one hand, the very logic of European integration has certainly informed Turkey's "soft power" policy of diffusing regional conflicts and consolidating regional

³"Turkey's Top Foreign Policy Aide Worries about False Optimism in Iraq," *Council on Foreign Relations*, <http://www.cfr.org>, 19 September 2008.

alliances through the pursuit of economic interdependence. EU conditionality has also become the main catalyst for reducing the army's disproportionately high role in the foreign policy apparatus – notably by way of reforming institutions such as the powerful National Security Council. At the same time, however, growing anxiety about the exact nature of Turkey's future relationship with the EU has led players from all across the Turkish political spectrum to question the wisdom of putting all of Turkey's eggs in a single basket. This had added additional currency to the idea of pursuing a “multifaceted” foreign policy.

For the Record

Turkey's diversification of its foreign policy portfolio has already delivered a number of tangible results. Under the AKP's watch, Turkey's trade with neighboring and Black Sea countries as a share of total trade has nearly doubled: between 2002 and 2008, the share of exports to the region as a percentage of total Turkish exports has leapt from 11.0 percent to 20.4 percent. Imports, meanwhile, have risen from 15.5 percent to 27.6 percent. Relations with countries like Russia, Syria, Iran and Greece have improved vastly. Even in the case of Armenia –where diplomatic relations are hostage to historical disagreements– rapprochement appears to be on the cards.

Turkey has also undertaken a number of ambitious and highly praised mediation efforts, evidence that Ankara is beginning to emerge as a regional broker. The AKP government has mediated in talks between Lebanese factions; between Iraq and its neighbors; between India and Pakistan; between Pakistan and Afghanistan; between Syria and Israel; and between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. It has risen to the task in supporting the Annan Plan for a solution to the Cyprus issue in 2004. It has also pressed for a solution to the simmering Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. And, in the wake of the August 2008 war in Georgia, it has launched the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP), a regional platform bringing together Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Given such an impressive diplomatic resume, it is no surprise that Turkey was able to secure a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council in the fall of 2008, the first time since 1961.

There is a dimension to Turkey's new foreign policy, however, that points to a certain inconsistency and naïveté. Some of it was on display during the war in Gaza – not so much in the form of Erdoğan's outburst in Davos as in the AKP government's one-sided reading of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some of it was also on display when Turkey invited Hamas leader Khaled Meshal to Turkey after the group's election victory in January 2006. The visit, organized

by Ankara in an attempt to soften Hamas' opposition to a two-state solution badly backfired: Meshal, instead of moderating his stance, used the occasion to illustrate that Hamas was not as internationally isolated as Europe and the U.S. liked to claim. A similar scenario played itself out again in August 2008, when Turkey played host to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Eager to cast itself as a credible intermediary between Iran and the West, particularly on the subject of Tehran's nuclear program, Turkey gave Ahmadinejad the limelight he craved, but seemed to make no headway in addressing the nuclear issue.

Immediately after Barack Obama's election to the American presidency, Erdoğan made a show of offering his services as a liaison between America and Iran on the nuclear issue. Given the trust Turkey had built up with Iran, said the Prime Minister, Ankara would be better placed than the EU to facilitate talks with Tehran. Within days of making the offer, however, Erdoğan undermined Turkey's credibility as a potential arbiter –deviating from Turkey's official position– when he argued that “those who ask Iran not to produce nuclear weapons should themselves give up their nuclear weapons.”⁴

The AKP government's policy towards Sudan has also frustrated western policymakers. Quick to label the Israeli operations in Gaza a “crime against humanity”, Erdoğan has shied away from using similar language in reference to the much more extensive atrocities taking place in Darfur. The situation in Darfur, as far as Ankara is concerned, is instead “a humanitarian tragedy”, a term which seems to absolve the Sudanese authorities of responsibility for the 300,000 dead and 2.2 million displaced. The sad irony of Erdoğan's refusal to take phone calls from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during the Gaza offensive, his accusing Peres of “knowing very well how to kill people” one day and hosting the Sudanese vice president in Ankara less than a week later has made further accusations of hypocrisy all but inevitable.

Conclusion

Where is Turkey headed, then? Simply put, it is not going anywhere. Rather than turning away from the West, Ankara is coming to terms with the fact that its neighborhood consists not only of Europe, but also of the Middle East, the Black Sea and the Caspian. It has been doing so for more or less a decade, the turning point in its foreign policy coming not in 2009 in Davos, but in 1999 in Helsinki and in 2002 in Ankara.

Undeniably, the AKP government is breaking with the old Kemalist notion of Turkey as a country located exclusively –in cultural and strategic terms– in

⁴“Erdoğan's Challenging Remarks on Nuclear Power Spark Debate,” *Today's Zaman*, 18 November 2008.

the West. But engagement with Damascus and Tehran does not have to mean disengagement from Brussels and Washington – or from Tel Aviv, for that matter. On 7 March, the Turkish and Israeli ministers held reconciliation talks to contain the potential fallout from Davos. “The ties between Israel and Turkey are very important and are of a strategic nature which stands on a firm foundation,” they concluded. “Cooperation between the two states is important for the stability of the region and must continue.”⁵

Turkey’s allies in Europe and the U.S. are right to worry that Ankara’s “zero problems with neighbors” policy leads it to engage with a few unsavory characters. They are also entitled to point out that the sort of inflammatory rhetoric used by the AKP government during the war in Gaza, be it for emotional appeal or political ends, threatens to release a wave of pent-up anti-Semitism in Turkey. And they are certainly well within their rights to claim that Turkey’s position on the genocide in Sudan is at odds with the moral high ground it claims on other international issues.

Of course, none of these are grounds to conclude that –as a recent headline read– the West has lost Turkey. Turkey is still the only country in the Middle East capable of engaging in constructive dialogue with Israel, Syria and Iran. As such, it has a chance to become a powerful agent for change in its neighborhood, particularly in light of the Obama administration’s focus on building bridges in the Middle East. For both Brussels and Washington, Turkey remains an invaluable partner in the region – even if it is yet to realize that being everyone’s best friend is easier said than done.

⁵ “Erdoğan’s Challenging Remarks on Nuclear Power Spark Debate,” *Today’s Zaman*, 18 November 2008.