

WHERE IS NATO IN TURKEY?

This article will be an overview of the current debates about NATO in general that are held in Turkish media. Especially after September 2009, relations between NATO and Turkey have entered a new era because of the 'new' foreign policy of Turkey under the AKP government, Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan and due to the 'new' structuring inside the NATO with the 'New Strategic Concept'. This article will focus on the most heated topics about NATO in Turkish media and how they are discussed. However it also aims to display that there are a lot of deficiencies and missing points in these discussions which makes them non-exhaustive. For instance, it will be seen that the discussions in Turkey are emotional in the sense that NATO is deemed to be full of symbols and meanings that there is always something more than its image, rather than seeing just as an international institution.

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NATO has always been an important and indispensable ally for Turkey's strategic security policies. However, particularly after NATO's military involvement in Afghanistan and in the course of the debate about NATO's New Strategic Concept, questions have been raised in Turkey about its future position in the new NATO. This article looks at the discussions about NATO in Turkish media since September 2009, focusing on issues such as how Turkey's new foreign policy relates to NATO and the announcement by U.S. President Obama of a new strategy in Afghanistan. In this framework, various Turkish analysts raise and address questions such as "Is NATO still an organization that makes Turkey feel safe in the international arena?" and "Is there still an alignment of threat perception and foreign policy goals?"

After the fall of the Berlin Wall which signified the end of the USSR, or in other words the elimination of the original common threat to NATO members, discussions about the future of NATO began. Some in the international community said NATO should be abolished because the main reason for its foundation diminished. Others asserted there was still much left for NATO to do, such as the Kosovo case. (And later NATO's first out-of-area mission, in Afghanistan, was initiated). As the former NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer pointed out, NATO will now have three key factors: "First, the evolution of the global security environment – in other words: what are the challenges that we need to confront in the years ahead and how do they affect us? The second factor is the sense of common purpose among the Allies – in other words, do we share a common perception of the threats and of the responses and, if so, can we muster the political will to act? The third factor relates to NATO as an institution – can the organization generate sufficient political influence and military means in order to perform what we expect from it?"¹

In this changing environment for NATO, the position of Turkey, as a member that has influence not only because it has the second largest army of the organization but also due to its contribution to civilian operations in places like Afghanistan, is an important concern.² However, as these internal discussions are going on in NATO, there are also some voices heard in the Western media that Turkish foreign policy is shifting its axis under the AKP government. The 'one-minute' incident in Davos meetings on January 2009 and rhetoric of AKP government favorable towards Iran, Russia and many Arab countries, for instance, has especially raised questions about whether Turkey is turning her back on the West and whether Turkey will pursue a new foreign and security policy that is different from NATO's.

¹ Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, "The Future of NATO," Speech given on 23 March 2009 at the GMF Brussels Forum.

² Ibid.

Analogous with these discussions, a lot of hot debates occurred about the current relationship between Turkey and her Western allies in NATO. However, it should be noted that Turkish public opinion about NATO is missing in these debates. Public opinion is an important matter that should be mentioned in order to truly understand the position of Turkey towards NATO and to comprehend the perception of NATO in Turkey. Moreover, not only public opinion but also the interpretations of these public opinions are also missing in the debates about NATO. Hence, we always read about the AKP government's foreign policy as it relates to NATO, the U.S.' new policy towards Afghanistan or the possibilities of new relations between NATO and Turkey, but nothing about the opinion of Turkish society.

The topics taken up in the Turkish debate on NATO primarily is with regard to NATO in Afghanistan and the position of Turkey on the war in Afghanistan. The discussions about this topic are mostly based on Obama's new strategic plan about the new role of NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Because it is one of the most important topics for the U.S., after being elected

as president, Obama instituted a new strategy towards Afghanistan in order to quicken stabilization and further the construction and democratization of Afghanistan, as well as in order to end the war in the country rapidly. The U.S. offered six thousand more soldiers to NATO. Moreover, as Amberin Zaman writes in newspaper *Taraf* on November 2009, Obama with this strategic plan decided to change the nature of the war in Afghanistan. What Obama was planning to do is that with more soldiers, to try to suppress the power of Taliban and form alliances with local leaders; and most importantly they will also back up this military power with civilian capacities to strengthen the stability by building roads, schools and hospitals.³

While discussing this new strategy, among the Turkish media, it is widely accepted that the existence of NATO for eight years did not solve any problem, and moreover it is also widely accepted that Turkey's position among NATO members is more prominent and if Turkey would send soldiers there, they should not be in

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³ Amberin Zaman, "Obama'nın Afganistan Kumarı" [Obama's Afghanistan Gamble], *Taraf*, 27 November 2009.

a fighting position. However, there are two important divisions on how Turkey's stance should be in this war, whether it should involve itself in war or not. One side says that because Turkey has strong historical and cultural ties to Afghanistan, and because the Turkish army in Afghanistan has had a lot of success and gains an important prestige and influence among Afghani people with not fighting but with using its civilian capacities, Turkey becomes different from other NATO allies and its importance is furthered quite a bit if Obama really want success in Afghanistan. Turkey would help to end the war in Afghanistan by becoming an active negotiator in the region. In this respect, Amberin Zaman in *Taraf* points out that because of these reasons; "... , U.S. needs the wisdom of Turkey rather than its soldiers. And the wisdom says that without talking with Iran and Taliban and without reaching

a fair solution for the Palestinian problem, it is not possible to have a realistic and permanent peace in the region."⁴

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Moreover, in *Radikal*, Murat Yetkin on December 2009 points out that "It is so because for Turkey, Afghanistan is not just Afghanistan. Afghanistan is not seen through its relations with Pakistan as U.S. is seeing it. Rather, Afghanistan is one of the cornerstones for Turkey in its Central Asia policy and, as President Gül states, it is critical that Turkey should not be in a position of fighting there. It could be said that NATO and U.S. is beginning to see this fact."⁵

Ferai Tınç from *Hürriyet* on February 2010 says that Turkish soldiers could support and encourage the Afghan state and society to take the control of their own country and to fortify the stability in their own country.⁶ She also adds that as a NATO member and as its distinct character in this context, Turkey could be a "political leader" in the region.⁷ Moreover, on December 2009, Gökhan Bacık from *Zaman* supports this argument by saying that Turkey with a global vision that makes it different from other NATO members should be active in the region.⁸

⁴ Amberin Zaman, "Obama'nın Afganistan Kumarı" [Obama's Afghanistan Gamble], *Taraf*, 27 November 2009.

⁵ Murat Yetkin, "Holbrooke: Türkiye Afganistan için vazgeçilmez önemde" [Holbrooke: Turkey has an indispensable importance for Afghanistan], *Radikal*, 4 December 2009.

⁶ Ferai Tınç, "Afganistan'da Türkiye'nin rolü" [Turkey's Role in Afghanistan], *Hürriyet*, 7 February 2010.

⁷ Ferai Tınç, "Afganistan'da yeni savaş yeni roller" [New War and New Roles in Afghanistan], *Hürriyet*, 15 February 2010.

⁸ Gökhan Bacık, "Yurtdışına Asker Göndermek: İhtiyat ve Zorunluluk Arasındaki Denge" [Sending Soldiers Abroad: Balance between Vigilance and Obligation], *Zaman*, 6 December 2009.

However there is another camp in this discussion that is simply saying that Afghanistan will be the second Vietnam for the U.S., and hence, Turkey should not be included this muddle. According to this thinking, if Turkey supports the efforts in Afghanistan, it will also be bogged down in the mess.⁹ In other words, this camp is against any inclusion of Turkey in Afghanistan simply because Western powers are demanding it. Okay Gönensin from *Vatan*, states that the U.S. will demand more from Turkey as it accepts any partnership in Afghanistan. Hence engaging in a war in Afghanistan is not of any interest to Turkey.¹⁰ Hüseyin Altınalan from *Milli Gazete* on October 2009 states that “They will make Korean War come alive for Turkish soldiers.”¹¹ Moreover, he says that if Turkish soldiers are sent into Afghanistan, this will result in to shed Muslim blood by Muslims. İbrahim Karagül from *Yeni Şafak* on December 2009 says that “We do not see this war of NATO and U.S. as legitimate, and we should not allow them to waste Turkish influence there.”¹²

Another mostly heated topic in terms of NATO is the foreign policy that is held by the AKP government in Turkey. It begins with the ‘one-minute incident’ in the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in January 2009 and Turkey’s favorable rhetoric towards Iran, Russia and Syria. What is mostly discussed in this aspect is whether Turkey is shifting its axis towards the Middle East, and whether Turkey’s security policies will begin to be separated from NATO. These discussions in Turkey become more intense with the articles that are published in the most prominent Western newspapers. These newspapers are basically saying that Turkey is changing its direction towards the East and due to this, it could be a dangerous partner for the West. For instance, an article from the November 2009 issue of *The Wall Street Journal* is the most prominent one because it states that “It’s time that NATO starts thinking about a worst case scenario in Turkey. For even if the increasingly Islamist state remains a NATO partner, at best, it seems Turkey will be an unreliable partner.”¹³ Haluk Şahin from *Radikal* writes on November 2009 that although there are a lot of Western articles about Turkey that are full of unreliable and unheeded arguments, the recent articles, especially the one in the *Washington Post*, should be taken into account because these articles mirror the White House. According to him, with these articles, the West shows its discontent regarding Turkey’s approach to Russia, Syria and Iran and Turkey’s attitude against Israel. Moreover, Şahin states that the Turkish government should realize that Turkey cannot both enjoy the benefit of being partner with NATO and

⁹ Ruşen Çakır, “Obama’nın Afganistan Hayalleri ve Biz” [Obama’s Afghanistan Dreams and Us], *Vatan*, 3 December 2009.

¹⁰ Okay Gönensin, “Bir Vietnam Daha” [Vietnam All Over Again], *Vatan*, 5 December 2009.

¹¹ Hüseyin Altınalan, “Mehmetçik’e İkinci Kore Faciası Yaşatacaklar” [They Will Make Second Korean Calamity Come Alive for Turkish Soldiers], *Milli Gazete*, 30 October 2009.

¹² İbrahim Karagül, “Sen İskender’den Daha mı Büyüksün!” [Are You Greater than Alexander?], *Yeni Şafak*, 4 December 2009.

¹³ David Schenker, “A NATO Without Turkey?”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 November 2009.

enjoy the relationships with Iran, Syria and Russia.¹⁴ However, Mehmet Yılmaz from *Zaman* on November 2009 says that because Turkey still continues its relations with NATO and other Western allies, there is no such thing as ‘shifting its axis’ for Turkey. He also adds that Turkey is engaging with relations not only with Iran or Syria, but also with Russia, China, etc. So it is not a regional direction but a global direction overall. He states that this is not because Turkey wants to cut its relations with the West but because Turkey wants to fix its relations with its neighbors and also wants to find solutions to the regional problems.¹⁵ Hüseyin Altınalan from *Milli Gazete* also states that Turkey is not changing its foreign policy direction because it is sending more soldiers to Afghanistan, getting ready to have more responsibilities about Afghanistan; and it continues its agreements with Israel. However, differently from Mehmet Yılmaz, he furthers his point by saying that Israel is the country that is responsible from the “shift in axis rumors” in the West because Israel does not want Turkey to have peaceful relations with its neighbors and because Israel wants to provoke the West against Turkey.¹⁶

Since the report issued by NATO, on 17 May 2010, the ‘new foreign policy direction’ discussions have focused on the new relations between Iran and Turkey. In this report that is prepared to outline NATO’s new strategy, NATO declared that “Iran’s ballistic missile and nuclear programs constituted a major threat to the security of the Western alliance”¹⁷ and at the same days an agreement about nuclear weapons was conducted between Turkey-Brazil and Iran. Because Iran is accused by NATO of producing nuclear weapons, this “new” foreign policy of the Turkish government turns into a strategic security problem between NATO and Turkey. Cengiz Çandar who writes for both *Hürriyet* and *Radikal* on May 2010 relates a story of him in a conference about the “Transatlantic Response to Iran’s Nuclear Programme”. He says that he was the only Turk in the conference and all other people are mentioning about the necessity of punishing Iran because of its nuclear facilities. In a coffee break, Çandar says to his associates that “The attitude of Turkey resembles the approach of the Non-Aligned Movement to Third World.” In response to this, people ask Çandar, “Then, what are you doing in NATO? You have to leave NATO.” But Çandar says that there is no common vision in NATO about this subject hence Turkey need not opt out of NATO. He adds also that the policies of Turkey and Brazil should not be seen from a narrow perspective. Turkey is not changing its direction and Turkey does not want to drift apart from NATO only because it has agreements with Iran. “The architecture of the international system is changing with Turkey’s new activism with other ‘democratic

¹⁴ Haluk Şahin, “Washington’da Değişen” [What is Changed in Washington], *Radikal*, 25 November 2009.

¹⁵ Mehmet Yılmaz, “Türkiye Nereye Gidiyor?” [Where is Turkey Going?], *Zaman*, 2 November 2009.

¹⁶ Hüseyin Altınalan, “Eksen yaygarasının ardındaki gerçek” [The Truth Behind the Axis Fuss], *Milli Gazete*, 6 November 2009.

¹⁷ “NATO Report calls Iran a ‘major Article 5 threat’”, *World Tribune*, 18 May 2010.

countries’.”¹⁸ However, Güngör Mengi from *Vatan* looks from another perspective and says that “The missile shield of NATO that will be established in Europe would not protect Turkey from any attacks that would come from Iran. Hence, Turkey should be ready to protect herself.”¹⁹

The Balkans is the other region that is discussed within the framework of the ‘new’ direction of Turkish foreign policy. It is particularly significant in the discussions of NATO because Turkey engages in active negotiations with its NATO allies to help Bosnia to get the Membership Action Plan from NATO. This becomes a Turkish initiative under the leadership of Ahmet Davutoğlu because, as Deniz Zeyrek from *Radikal* states on February 2010, the U.S. and Europe could not solve the problem properly by collaborating with all sides in the Balkans. Moreover, they use ‘some technical problems’ as an excuse to obstruct Bosnia to get the Membership Action Plan (MAP).²⁰ As a result, negotiations for Bosnia’s status in NATO work and on April 2010, “Bosnia gets NATO membership plan” but with clear conditions.²¹ Avni Özgürel from *Radikal*, on February 2010, sees this initiative of Davutoğlu as a huge success because “The NATO membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina was a subject that was not even worth to talk for NATO countries just a couple of months before. But today, the membership of NATO and, as a result its border security, is being talked for Bosnia. NATO is obliged to open the way for Bosnia although until now it does not accept any project that U.S. does not approve. At first it was thought that Ankara will not find any support, however Ankara reached this end by negotiations that is nicely summarized by Hungarians as ‘We now feel ourselves as NATO members because our ideas are also taken into account and they are considered as important. These all are on account of Turkey.’”²² However, Dr Abdullah Özkan from *Milli Gazete* states that the Turkish vision in these negotiations is to connect the Balkans which is Turkey’s Ottoman heritage to NATO which is the focal point of imperialist goals. In other words, Turkish vision is to be “subcontractor” of Western powers. He says that “We reach this result from the interviews of Ahmet Davutoğlu. He says one of these interviews that ‘Our vision is to integrate Balkans to Europe fully. And one day, our historical places in Istanbul, Belgrade, Skopje, Sarajevo and Edirne will unite again under European Union flag...’”²³

As a result, it could be seen that in Turkey, discussions about NATO are always stuck with an East and West problem or the interests of U.S. as a country. There

¹⁸ Cengiz Çandar, “Neo-Türkiye”[Neo-Turkey], *Hürriyet*, 28 May 2010.

¹⁹ Güngör Mengi, “Bu Açıklama Senet Olsun” [Let This Declaration Be a Voucher], *Vatan*, 14 September 2009.

²⁰ Deniz Zeyrek, “İran-Afganistan derken Bosna’yı unutmamalı” [We should not forget Bosnia while dealing with Iran and Afghanistan], *Radikal*, 16 February 2010.

²¹ Bosnia gets NATO Membership Plan, *BBC News*, 22 April 2010.

²² Avni Özgürel, “Erdoğan-Davutoğlu(2)”, *Radikal*, 17 February 2010.

²³ Abdullah Özkan, “Türkiye, AB ve NATO’nun taşeronu mu?” [Is Turkey Subcontractor of EU and NATO?], *Milli Gazete*, 26 April 2010.

is no comprehensive discussion about the relations between NATO and Turkey and no analysis that focuses on NATO as an institution. It always merges with supposed “interests” of the U.S. and Western powers that are always against Turkey for some intellectuals or not necessarily always against Turkey’s interests for others. Hence, the approach to the problems about NATO is emotional in the sense that from all of the sides, it is not seen as an international organization but as an icon filled with symbols and meanings that there is always something behind the scenes and that there is always something more than its image. The only difference is the rhetoric of different sides. One side that is more neo-liberal associates NATO with democratic Western powers and although some of their policies like the invasion of Afghanistan are not correct, Turkey should continue to be an ally of NATO in order to be a Western and democratic country. The other side that is mostly Islamists and nationalists, however, sees NATO as the toy of U.S. and the instrument of imperialism. Moreover for the Islamic media, NATO leads to confrontation between Turkey and other Muslim countries. For instance Abdülkadir Özkan of *Milli Gazete* states on December 2009 says that we could not even decide our own enemies because they are determined and imposed upon us by NATO and the U.S..²⁴ He says that “NATO now chooses its enemy as Islam that is symbolized with green. Same situation is happening in our country also. Elites are creating new ‘dangers’ according to circumstances and use these artificial ‘dangers’ to justify democracy deficits. In this respect, the strategies of our elites are in parallel with NATO’s strategies.”²⁵

There are also discussions about the importance of NATO and whether Turkey should continue to be a NATO member or not. Cemil Ertem from *Taraf* on December 2009 states in one of his articles that “2010 will be NATO’s year. It is so because of the fact that nuclear technology are in everywhere now, U.S. has got it, but Iran also. Hence, there would be no winners in a regional war or in a global war. Therefore, regional war dynamics will be deactivated and national armies will assign their sovereignty to NATO. Global controls for armament will be done by NATO. Hence, countries like Turkey where the army is a dominant political actor will meet finally with democracy.”²⁶ However, Ümit Kardaş from *Zaman* on June 2010 states that NATO should be abolished because “it is way more than important that the permanent members of the UN Security Council disarm than those developing countries to disarm. It is there permanent members who are selling weapons to developing countries. To realize this disarmament the UN regime

²⁴ Abdülkadir Özkan, “Dost ve Düşmanı Başkaları Belirlerse...” [If others determine our friends and our enemies...], *Milli Gazete*, 14 May 2010.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Cemil Ertem, “2010 Notları-1 (2010 NATO yılı olacak)” [Notes for 2010-1 (2010 will be NATO’s year)], *Taraf*, 22 December 2009.

should be democratized, UN Peacekeeping forces should be strengthened and organizations like NATO should be abolished.”²⁷

One can not predict in what direction relations between NATO and Turkey will evolve. But one thing is for sure: Turkey can not ignore NATO. Therefore, informative and comprehensive discussions about NATO are needed in Turkey to shape the vision of Turkish society.

²⁷ Ümit Kardaş, “Gücün Hukuku ve Küresel Demokrasi” [Law of Power and Global Democracy], *Zaman*, 7 June 2010.