

TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER SEPTEMBER 11: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EU DIMENSION

The tragic events of September 11th may have added a new dimension to Turkey's global significance which had decreased with the ending of the Cold War. This article discusses whether Turkey can be defined as a benign regional power and how the course of events starting from 1999, such as the capture of the terrorist leader Abdullah Ocalan and the declaration of Turkey as a candidate for EU membership have contributed to Turkey's constructive role in the region. The changing nature of US-Turkish relations and Turkey's domestic transformations are viewed in light of Turkey's bid for EU full membership.

Ziya Öniş*

* Professor of International Relations, Koç University, Istanbul. E-mail address: zonis@ku.edu.tr . Readers are referred to a collection of papers on Turkey-EU-US relations available at <http://home.ku.edu.tr/~zonis/> from which this shorter paper has emerged.

During the Cold War era Turkey was an important country for the Western Alliance as a key NATO partner in the Eastern Mediterranean acting as a barrier to Soviet expansionism towards the south. In contrast, Turkey's geo-strategic significance appeared to have declined somewhat in the immediate post-Cold War era. In this period European and American conceptions of Turkey's importance for Western security differed markedly. Turkey continued to have a more important role for the American policy makers as a dependable ally in a highly unstable region extending from the Middle East to the former Soviet Central Asia, and also a critical region from a Western point of view given the depth of the region's energy resources. Nevertheless, even for the United States, the importance attached to Turkey's geopolitical role was clearly not comparable to the Cold War era. From a largely inward-oriented European perspective, Turkey, as a potential full-member of the European Union appeared to be more of a security liability than an asset in the 1990s. Indeed, the Western powers failed to attach much significance to the Turkish involvement, first during the Bosnian War and subsequently the Kosovo conflict.¹ However, September 11 marks a new turning point. Once again Turkey has become important for the West for an entirely new set of reasons extending beyond narrowly defined security considerations.

A central question to pose in this context is the extent to which Turkey has the capacity to act as a "benign regional power" and play a constructive role in the Middle East and the Muslim Central Asia during the course of the next decade and whether the tragic events of September 11 constitute a critical opening in this respect. For our purposes, a middle power that aims to act as benign regional power ought to display the following characteristics. First, a benign regional power interacts with its surrounding region by developing a network of economic and political relations involving both state and non-state actors. Second, it tries to set itself as a model of economic development and democracy promotion. Furthermore, it adopts a balanced approach to bilateral conflicts in the region and seeks to contribute to the resolution of such conflicts through diplomatic pressures on both sides involved. A "benign regional power" may be distinguished from a "coercive regional power" in the sense that the latter is much more willing to use force to impose its presence in the surrounding region, its approach often being dictated by the principles of hard-line realism. Coercive regional powers can become a source of instability and insecurity in their surrounding regions. This process is aggravated further by the tendency often displayed by such powers to take active sides in bilateral conflicts.

Turkey during the course of the 1980s and the 1990s, dictated by its hard security considerations in the context of the armed conflict against the Kurdish separatist organization, PKK, displayed elements of a coercive regional power. The frequent operations of the Turkish army in Northern Iraq and Syria and the strong ties that developed with Israel in this context, with a strong emphasis on military co-operation, constitute elements that are certainly closer to our definition of a coercive rather than a benign regional power. In the past few years, however, we observe a striking shift in

¹ On the evolution of Turkish foreign policy and for comprehensive analyses of Turkey's relation with Western powers both during the Cold War and post-Cold War contexts, see Hale (2000) and Kramer (2000) and Larrabee and Lesser (2003). On Northern Iraq as a trouble spot in Turkish American relations, see Kirişçi (2001).

Turkey's position from a coercive to a benign or constructive regional power. Arguably, the year 1999 represents a crucial turning point in this transition process.

The Importance of the EU Anchor

In retrospect, two events during the course of 1999 exercised a crucial role in transforming the nature of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East. The first event of vital importance was the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish separatist organization, PKK, in February 1999. This effectively marked the end of a fifteen year intense military conflict with the PKK: It also paved the way for a more balanced approach towards the Kurdish population based on civil initiatives and the extension of cultural rights of the Kurds within the territorial limits of the Turkish state. This was followed by yet another critical turning point in the European Council's Helsinki Summit of December 1999. The EU's decision at Helsinki to recognize Turkey as a candidate for full-membership had deep ramifications on Turkey's domestic politics and the nature of state-society relations during the first three years of the new century. The Helsinki decision has clearly accelerated the process of democratic consolidation in Turkey and a number of crucial reforms in both the economic and the political realms have been accomplished.² It is also striking that the deep economic crisis that Turkey experienced in November 2000 and February 2001 have helped to break down the opposition to reforms and, hence, accelerated the pace of economic reforms on both the economic and the democratization fronts. A large majority of the Turkish population is in favor of EU membership. Not surprisingly, the attractiveness of the material benefits associated with full-membership has become even more pronounced in the midst of a deep economic crisis. The process of democratization, however, is far from complete. Legislative changes involving an improvement in the civil and human rights record need to be translated into implementation. The privileged position of the Turkish army in Turkey's domestic politics is still a case of major concern from the EU perspective. Moreover, the Cyprus dispute continues to constitute a formidable barrier to Turkish membership, in spite of the fact that the recent UN proposals in the form of the Annan Plan, present a remarkable opportunity to break the deadlock. The EU is highly unlikely to initiate accession negotiations with Turkey from December 2004 onwards unless steps are taken to resolve the Cyprus dispute within the framework of the Annan Plan during the course of 2004. On a positive note, however, most observers would agree that the pace of reforms designed to satisfy the basic Copenhagen criteria would have been unimaginable a few years ago.

Turkey's ability to play a benign regional role clearly depends on its ability to transform its economy and democratic regime. During the course of the 1990s, Turkey's ability to play a constructive role in its surrounding regions was seriously hampered by the major crises that the country faced in both the economic and the political realms. Although Turkey had a long-standing relationship with the European Union (or the European Community in the early stages), dating back to the early 1960s, the relationship failed to display the smooth pattern that was certainly the case for Greece's accession as a full-member and the path followed by key former Communist states such as Poland and Hungary post-1989 leading to their full-

² On the nature of Turkey-EU Relations in recent decades, see Müftüler-Baç (1997). On the consequent of the Helsinki and the Copenhagen Summits, see Öniş (2003a) and Uğur (2003).

membership by May 2004.³ The underlying reasons for the awkward relationship between Turkey and the EU over time are beyond the scope of our analysis. Clearly, both the deficiencies of Turkey's domestic politics as well as the deep questions concerning Turkey's alleged European identity in Europe itself have contributed to this uneasy relationship. What is important for our purposes is that membership of the Customs Union with the EU, which came into effect at the end of 1995, falling significantly short of full-membership, failed to provide the sufficient mix of conditions and incentives that would induce a deep transformation in the nature of Turkish economy and democracy. In this sense the Helsinki decision was crucial. For the first time after Helsinki, Turkey faced a more balanced set of conditions and incentives to undertake reforms, notably in the democratization arena.

Closer relations with the EU in the post-1999 era and the acceleration of economic and political reforms in the domestic sphere have also been translated into a change in Turkey's foreign policy behavior. Turkey's policy towards the Middle East has become less assertive and more balanced over the past few years. There has been a certain rapprochement with Syria following the end of the armed conflict with the PKK. Similarly, the close relationship with Israel while not disappearing has been somewhat subdued in recent years. The pendulum is clearly swinging towards a more balanced approach regarding Israel and the Arab world, particularly in relation to the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

Turkey, as a potential EU member, will have the additional advantage of playing a constructive role through established EU initiatives in the region in the two central domains of economic co-operation and promotion of democracy. Indeed from this point onwards, Turkey could play a more active role in the "Barcelona Process", a project that aims to develop an extensive network of economic and political ties with the Middle Eastern and North African countries located around the Mediterranean, yet falling short of full-membership for the countries concerned. Hitherto, Turkey has been reluctant to play an active part in the Barcelona Process based on the fear, largely mistaken in our view, that such an active role would be synonymous with accepting a subordinate status within the EU prior to the realization of full-membership.

Clearly, an alternative scenario involving Turkey's isolation from Europe, arising from a possible failure to graduate to full-membership status will imply a situation of overdependence on the United States and on the bilateral relationship with Israel as well as a process of re-polarization in domestic politics.⁴ This is likely to operate against Turkey's own interests as well as its ability to play the role of a benign regional power. Turkey's possible isolation from Europe is likely to have major negative ramifications for both its economy and democracy. Consequently, its ability to play the role model and act as source of stability for its surrounding regions will be seriously hampered. At this point, one needs to raise the question of whether the EU is indeed willing to transform itself at this juncture from an inward-oriented entity to the

³ For a comparative analysis that highlights the significantly more favorable incentive structure that Poland faced in its relations with the EU from the early 1990s onwards that rendered the path to full-membership a relatively smooth process, see Öniş (2003b).

⁴ On the future of the Turkey-EU-US triangle in the light of the dramatic changes taking place in Turkish politics and the global context, see Öniş and Yılmaz (2003)

status of a truly global actor.⁵ The decision to incorporate Turkey as a full-member and to extend its boundaries to the conflict zones of the Middle East would the EU to be decisive regarding becoming an active global player in its own right.

The Ramifications of September 11

Moving beyond the Helsinki decision, two more recent critical points may be identified with potentially far-reaching consequences for Turkey's role in the Middle East and the Central Asia. The first is the events of September 11, the second is the outcome of the November 2002 elections in Turkey that brought a government with Islamist roots to power. Consequences of these two turning points are heavily interrelated for Turkey. From the perspective of the Western powers, a major impact of September 11 involved the need to increase dialogue and mutual understanding with the Islamic world. Such a dialogue was not only important for the United States, but it was also crucial for the European Union which has a significant Muslim minority within its borders and is geographically much closer to the Muslim world than the United States. Clearly, Turkey as a secular and democratic country with a strong orientation towards the West has the potential to become a genuine model for the rest of the Middle East and Central Asia. During the early 1990s, Turkey had the potential to present itself as a model of multiculturalism and a secular version of Islam. Nevertheless, the country's democratic deficits, particularly as reflected in its inability to extend democratic rights to its own minorities, effectively meant that its potential as a role model could not be realized in practice. Furthermore, the democratic deficit also manifested itself as a rather rigid form of secularism that effectively failed to incorporate the demands for religious freedoms on the part of the more liberal Islamist groups. Both of these aspects have reduced the attractiveness of Turkey as a model of multiculturalism both for the West and the Islamic world. Yet, at the present juncture, a more democratic Turkey, moving steadily towards full EU membership, has a much greater potential to play the role of a model that is seen as critical in the post-September 11 context.

The recent elections in Turkey that brought into power "The Justice and Development Party"(Ak Partisi or the AKP) are particularly important in this respect.⁶ AKP has emerged as an outright winner in Turkish elections for the first time since 1987. The party projects the image of a center-right conservative party that respects the basic principles of a secular constitutional order in spite of its Islamist roots. Clearly, the potential success of this party would have far-reaching implications extending beyond Turkey's own borders. The link to the EU is once more striking. The trend involving the softening of political Islam in Turkey and progress towards EU membership are closely related phenomena. Islamists in Turkey in recent years have conceived of the EU as a mechanism to consolidate and protect their own position in Turkish society. However, they are also aware of the limits set by the EU, within which they need to operate, given the fact that the EU is strongly opposed to any form of religious fundamentalism. Turkey's secular establishment has also received the signal from the EU in terms of rethinking the boundaries of the rather rigid interpretation of secularism that limits the domain of any kind of religious freedoms. If the current government in Turkey justifies its democratic credentials and succeeds in staying

⁵ See Pienning (1997) in this context.

⁶ On the dynamics underlying the rise of the AKP and its electoral success in November 2000, see Öniş and Keyman (2003).

within the boundaries of a genuinely secular order, it is likely to have positive repercussions in the Middle East and the Islamic world.

The emerging post-September 11 environment embodies far-reaching implications for Turkey in terms of its future relations with the Middle East in a rather different context. One of the striking features of the new international context involves the growing assertiveness of US policy and the increasing rift between the US and Europe in terms of developing appropriate strategies to combat international terrorism.⁷ The EU appears to be in favor of multilateralism, envisaging an active role for the UN and for diplomatic pressures. The United States under the Bush Administration, guided by hard-line realist principles, is in favor of unilateralism and military solutions as the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq clearly testify. In this rapidly changing global context, characterized by a serious Trans-Atlantic divide, the appropriate strategy for Turkey would be to try to push for EU membership as rapidly as possible. Staying more explicitly within the EU camp will help Turkey to develop a more balanced relationship with the United States as well as playing a more restrained but constructive regional role.

Finally, Turkey's ability to project itself as a model and perform the role of a constructive middle power depends on the future path of liberalization in the Middle East and the Central Asia. If these regions of the world remain highly impervious to democratic currents and continue to be characterized by highly authoritarian regimes, an increasingly more democratic Turkey with close ties to the EU is likely to be regarded as a threat to the existing regimes and its role is likely to be restricted. Indeed, direct manifestations of such a trend seem to be evident in the context of Central Asian Republics such as Uzbekistan, countries with which Turkey had close economic and political ties in the early years of the post-Soviet era. Under an alternative scenario, however, based on the assumption that the Muslim Middle East and then the Muslim Central Asia are set on a course of rapid political liberalization, this will imply a significant increase in Turkey's capacity to play a constructive role in the region.

The Iraq War and Its Unintended Consequences for Turkey-EU Relations

The immediate impact of the Iraq War was a serious deterioration in Turkey-US relations following the unexpected decision of the Turkish Parliament to allow transit rights for US troops to Northern Iraq. The developments concerning Iraq, which set Turkish-American relations on a troubled path, ironically brought Turkey closer to the EU. Following the deterioration of relations with the US, assuming that the EU alternative was fully discarded, the result would have been total isolation. Given this background the AKP government has been able to press ahead with the EU related reforms at full speed during the course of 2003 and notably during the summer of 2003.

The Seventh Adjustment Package developed in response to the EU's Copenhagen Criteria has been ratified by the Parliament and went into effect on August 8, 2003. The Seventh Package represented a major turning point in Turkey-EU relations

⁷ On the emergence of the Trans-Atlantic rift, its consequences and the future of the Trans-Atlantic alliance, see Daalder (2003).

because for the first time the political leadership in Turkey found itself in a position to tackle the thorny question of civil-military relations and the status of and the civil-military balance within the National Security Council (NSC). The new reform package significantly curbed the role of military in politics, at least in principle, through measures including the limitation of the executive powers of the NSC, increasing civilian presence on the NSC, and bringing military expenditures (which were not publicly audited in the past) under the inspection of the Court of Accounts. These rather dramatic reforms were widely welcomed in the principal European capitals.

While Turkey has taken a giant step towards fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria by introducing key changes through legislation, implementing them will be the real challenge. The nationalist bloc in Turkey has been on the defensive since the chain of events that started with the Helsinki Summit, followed by the EU's Copenhagen Summit of December 2002, and finally the Iraq War. The resilience of the nationalist or the anti-EU coalition should not be underestimated. Indeed, Cyprus is likely to be the real test-case in this respect considering that members of the military-security establishment have expressed their grave reservations regarding the viability of the Annan Plan.

In immediate terms, the rather surprising decision of the Turkish Parliament helped Turkey move closer to the position of the core Franco-German alliance that constitutes the dominant force within the EU. This situation was an interesting and paradoxical development in the sense that the core alliance was less receptive to future Turkish membership whereas countries like Britain and Spain, that favored a looser pattern of integration with the EU, provided stronger support for Turkish membership. Turkey was already moving closer to the EU following the Helsinki and the Copenhagen Summits. Yet, the course of events instigated by the US military initiatives has clearly accelerated this process.

Concluding Observations

Turkey's changing domestic and external contexts in recent years have facilitated a striking shift in its position from a coercive to a potentially benign or constructive regional power. As Turkey moves closer from procedural to substantive democracy in line with the EU norms it will also be better placed in terms of its ability to resolve its Kurdish conflict through an extension of citizenship rights. A more democratic Turkey which is closely aligned with the EU is also likely to develop a more restrained position with respect to Iraqi Kurds. This, in turn, will be an important contribution to regional peace and stability. Furthermore, as Turkey moves closer to EU membership, it will also be in a more favorable position concerning its ability to reconstitute its long-standing relationship with the United States on a sound basis, with commitment to multilateralism emerging as the guiding principle. Turkey, not as an isolated state but as part of a broader entity such as the EU, will be in a much better position in terms of its ability to cooperate and bargain with the United States in the reconstruction of post-War Iraq which again is a crucial element for regional stability in the coming years.

The key question to pose, however, is whether the EU itself is willing and forward-looking enough to endorse this process. At the Copenhagen Summit, Turkey was

given a definitive date, namely December 2004, with the prospect of opening accession negotiations thereafter depending on the proper implementation of reforms in the interim period. Arguably, the outcome of the Copenhagen Summit could have been better from the Turkish point of view. If the EU had provided more powerful signals to Turkey, such as an earlier and definitive date for accession negotiations, this would have increased the resolve of the AKP government to confront the still powerful nationalist coalition in Turkey and resolve the Cyprus dispute along the lines of the Annan Plan. Indeed, following the Copenhagen Summit, the AKP government made a U-turn in its policy towards Cyprus and the Annan Plan was effectively sidelined in the early months of 2003. Clearly, if the Cyprus dispute is not resolved during the course of 2004 and the EU fails to agree on opening beginning accession negotiations in December 2004, this is likely to constitute a serious setback to Turkish democratization process and its ability to play a constructive role as a benign regional power in the Middle East.

References

- Daalder, Ivo H..(2003) ‘ The End of Atlanticism’, *Survival* 45 (2): 147-166.
- Hale, William. (2000) *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1774-2000*. London: Frank Cass.
- Kirişçi, Kemal. (2001) ‘US-Turkish Relations: New Uncertainties in a Renewed Partnership’, in Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirişçi, (eds.) *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power*, pp.129-149. Boulder Co.: Lynne Rienner.
- Kramer, Heinz. (2000) *A Changing Turkey: The Challenge To Europe and the United States*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution.
- Larrabee, F. Stephen and Ian O. Lesser. (2003) *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.
- Müftüler-Baç, Meltem. (1997) *Turkey’s Relations with a Changing Europe*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Öniş, Ziya. (2003a) ‘Domestic Politics, International Norms and Challenges to the State: Turkey-EU Relations in the Post-Helsinki Era’, *Turkish Studies* 4(1): 9-35.
- Öniş, Ziya. (2003b) ‘ Domestic Politics, Transnational Influences and the Impetus for Reform: The Diverse Paths of Poland and Turkey on the Road to EU Membership’, mimeo, Koç University. Available at <http://home.ku.edu.tr/~zonis/>.
- Öniş, Ziya and Fuat Keyman. (2003) ‘Turkey at the Polls: A New Path is Emerging’, *Journal of Democracy* 14(2): 95-107.
- Öniş, Ziya and Şuhnaz Yılmaz. (2003) ‘Turkey-EU-US Triangle in Perspective: Transformation or Continuity?’, mimeo, Koç University. ‘Available at <http://home.ku.edu.tr/~zonis/>.

Piennig, Chritopher. (1997) *Global Europe. The European Union in World Affairs*. Boulder Co.: Lynne Rienner.

Uğur, Mehmet. (2003) 'Testing Times in Turkey-EU Relations: The Road to Copenhagen and Beyond', *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 5 (2):165-183.