

# **TURKEY'S SEARCH FOR A "THIRD OPTION" AND ITS IMPACT ON RELATIONS WITH U.S. AND ISRAEL**

*The article focuses on Turkish search for a “third option,” a foreign policy that radiates greater independence and a claim for regional power status. AKP (Justice and Development Party) government, which came to power with no coherent foreign policy, has become most comfortable within the emerging “third option” framework, a move that both suits the party’s domestic internal agenda but also the needs to rediscover Turkey’s strategic assets. It is argued that Turkey’s new foreign policy line has so far harmed its relations with both the US and Israel, for very little return.*

**Anat Lapidot-Firilla\***

---

\* Dr. Anat Lapidot-Firilla is a Research Fellow at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. She also teaches at the Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies program at the same university. [anatlp@pluto.mscc.huji.ac.il](mailto:anatlp@pluto.mscc.huji.ac.il)

The genealogy of Turkish-Israeli-US relations has been well established by numerous researchers who pondered the fluctuating warming and cooling of relations between the countries. It would appear that all possible interpretations have been presented and conceptualized within theoretical frameworks. For example, the nature of the relationship was examined within the context of the balance of power in the Middle East, and the rationale of Israel and Turkey as outsider states with shared strategic perceptions in face of mutual security threats. Some researchers have even tried to place the discussion within the fashionable context of identity debate.

In his article on the subject, Bülent Aras noted that past analyses were mostly trapped in a Cold War mentality which he argues is no longer suitable in today's international arena.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Aras is right to argue that the polarized picture that divided the world into two opposing camps is somewhat old fashioned and certainly ideologically motivated. Nevertheless, alternatives have not been offered. The Cold War was the epitome of binary thinking, despite the fact that reality was inconveniently more complicated and small states did manage to play an interesting role in the international arena. Aras' article echoes the new winds of change in a post-Cold War era, in which Turkish foreign policy circles are in search of a "third option," a policy that radiates greater independence and a claim for regional superpower status.

However, what was claimed by De Gaulle in the 1960's, an independent alternative to the pro-Soviet or pro-American line is not necessarily a viable option for Turkey. In the Middle East, the world is still very much divided in a binary way, in spite of the existence of a single superpower. In the post-9/11 environment, where the Soviet Union has been replaced in many ways by the mythical Al Qaeda, a policy seeking to demonstrate more independence is bound to fail. Moreover, it is only within a binary framework, existing in the mind of policy makers, that Turkey can enjoy the role of "regional superpower." It is therefore argued that Turkey's new foreign policy line is working against Turkish interests and has so far harmed its relations with both the US and Israel, for very little return. What was achieved by Turgut Özal in the first Iraqi War is now being lost by Tayyip Erdoğan in the second.

### ***The Impact of the End of the Cold War***

William R. Keylor, in his book "The Twentieth Century World: An International History" describes the uneasiness historians of international relations feel when writing and interpreting events in their time.<sup>2</sup> This apprehension is the result of the absence of archival documentation and the lack of an eloquently distant chronological perspective. "Without such a perspective, the historian is challenged to separate the ephemeral from the fundamental in an effort to identify those forces that transform the international environment before our very eyes."<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Keylor noted that historians agree on the fact that the most significant development of the last 15 years has been the end of the Cold War with the disappearance of the Soviet Union from the world scene.<sup>4</sup> The impact of this central event is too quickly being forgotten or

---

<sup>1</sup> Bülent Aras, "The Academic Perceptions of Turkish- Israeli Relations," *Alternatives, Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol.1 No.1 (Spring 2002).

<sup>2</sup> William R. Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century World. An International History* (NY, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Keylor (1996), p.451.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.452.

ignored by those dealing with the relationship between the US, Turkey and Israel. Perhaps this is so because we live in a rapidly changing period of globalization and mass communication, which blurs all attempts at a long-term perspective.

The relationship between the three countries is currently being determined by the snowball effect created as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union. While it is hard to speculate about the final outcome of the process, it is quite clear that its major victim is Turkey's strategic importance for the west. The negative effects of the process first became evident in the Turkish-European theater. Since the emergence of the Cold War in the late 1940s, an important security dimension was added to Turco-European relations, thus relegating cultural differences to a secondary position. However, with the end of the Cold War, it became clear that while in the past relations has been conducted at a state-to-state level; it was no longer only between *states* but also between societies, an issue that has been well explored in the literature.<sup>5</sup> The end of the Soviet Union changed the hierarchy of states in Western Europe's eyes and offered an opportunity for Christian east European countries to join the European Union ahead of Turkey.

Turkey was placed, and is still in, a European "waiting room" as was well articulated by Erkan Erdoğdu.<sup>6</sup> But the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union was felt in other areas as well. The collapse shaped the position of Turkey vis-à-vis the US, both directly and indirectly. As a country with no WMD and somewhat of a declining strategic significance in the absence of a Soviet threat, Turkish foreign policy makers saw an urgent need to bolster the country's weakening position within the western alliance with an alternative policy. In a sense, since the end of the Cold War, Turkish foreign policy makers have struggled with the following question: How can Turkey remain an important security asset for the US, the primary source for economic assistance for the country, in an age when Turkey was no longer regarded as a frontier-state between the two superpowers?

In the face of new challenges, foreign policy strategy has had to evolve in order to move closer to its objectives: security, internal territorial integrity and economic development.

Since the first Iraqi war in 1991, Turkish foreign policy is therefore rearranging and shifting the regional map and geopolitical units. Until 1992, Turkey sought to present itself as the leader of a broader, regional "new world order," the leading country in a "Turkic front" made up of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>7</sup> This new Turkic belt placed Turkey as a regional superpower in the eyes of many in the US as well as in Israel. The willingness of Süleyman Demirel to assume political responsibility from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China highlighted Turkey's paramount importance to the US.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Erkan Erdoğdu, "Turkey and Europe: Undivided but not United," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 6 No. 2 (June 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Robins, "Between Sentiments and Self Interests: Turkey's Policy Toward Azerbaijan and the Central Asian States," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Autumn 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Idris Bal, *Turkey's Relationship with the West and the Turkish Republics*, (Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Company 2002).

However the scope of this strategy's success was soon realized to be limited, although still often echoed in Israel and even in US business circles. As a result, beginning in the latter part of 1992, a new conceptualization of Turkey's foreign policy could be discerned, aiming to present Turkey as a regional ally, with similar interest and growing concerns in developments in the Middle East. Turco-Israeli relations can also be examined in view of this change. The Madrid talks in 1991 and the Arab-Israeli peace process made this new path an easy one to follow. However, a few years later, the change of winds in the Middle East, the war in Iraq and the exposure of Turkey's weakening position in Iraq forced Turkish foreign strategists to re-map the region once again.

Turkey's new AKP government emphasized its interest in fostering closer ties with other countries in the region, such as Syria, and worked hard to be recognized as a leading country in the Organization of the Islamic Conference. In a post-9/11 world that is divided once more along the binary structure of the US, on the one hand, and Islamic Fundamentalism on the other, Turkey, it was hoped, could once more restore its strategic importance, this time as a mediator. In parallel with this opportunity, the aspiration of transforming into a regional superpower was rejuvenated. Indeed, a new conceptual map was needed and journalists, and some academics, echoing the AKP new jargon, expressed the changes in Turkish foreign policy. Instead of the past attempts to present Turkey as the leader of a Eurasian belt – a twin-circle map came into use. In such mapping Turkey offers to play the role of a regional broker, both on grounds of its Islamic moderation and its good relations with the West. In terms of its relations with Israel this was manifested in the AKP's hope of assuming an important mediating role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, rearranging the graphics – presenting a new map consisting of two circles of states in the Middle East – cannot alter the fact that Turkey is facing a new situation in which it lacks sufficient strategic assets in the eyes of US policy and decision makers.

One indirect result of the collapse of the Soviet Union was the creation of an internal Turkish process of free discussion over the nature of the Turkish citizenship and alternative identities. While this alone may not supply us with an explanation, it has served as a central contributor for the legitimization of an Islamic oriented party that over the past two decades has grown to represent the vast Turkish periphery. Indeed, one obvious change that influences the relationship between Turkey, Israel and US had to do with the change of the new Turkish political elite.

Hakan Yavuz, in his article on the ideological debate framework, already noted the importance of shared basic cultural “alliance” between the Turkish Kemalist elite and the Israeli one.<sup>9</sup> Both elites were dominated by westernized secular convictions, a similar security analysis that had placed the countries physically in the Middle East but emotionally in the West, a reluctance to associate with Arab countries and dominance of defense generals in its center of decision making. Criticism of such alliance was often expressed inside Turkey, but not until the 2002 election was it sincerely challenged.

---

<sup>9</sup> Hakan Yavuz, “Turkish-Israeli Relations Through the Lens of Turkish Identity Debate,” *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Autumn 1997).

AKP brought to power new convictions about the relationship between religion and the state, more daring incursions into the near-taboo subject of military-civilian relations and a new tone on different security and foreign matters. The two obvious examples though dissimilar in nature, of the changes introduced by AKP are the attitude toward the need to solve the problem in Cyprus and the transformation in attitude toward Israel. While this may need a further examination on different levels, including rhetoric analysis, it is safe to argue that AKP, which came to power with no coherent foreign policy, has become most comfortable within the emerging “third option” framework. This approach implies non-commitment to one side in the Middle East conflicts, whether regional, as in the case of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, or more general, such as the warming of relations with Muslim countries. This approach not only suits the party’s domestic agenda but also the needs to rediscover Turkey’s strategic importance.

Naturally, AKP’s new foreign policy was not formed in an international vacuum. Shortly after AKP came to power, the American invasion of Iraq - Turkey’s backyard - began. In addition, the war on international Islamic terrorism declared by the US became an internal problem as well, after a series of terrorist attacks in Istanbul. It placed Turkey on the side of the victims but also drew attention to the presence of strong Islamic, anti-western nests in Turkey.

In this complicated environment, in the middle of a Turkish campaign to join the EU, the relationship between domestic security policy and foreign policy overlapped once again. Turkey perceived that internal threats and foreign ones are interrelated and nourished by each other. The war in Iraq touched upon the most painful spot in the Turkish body - the fear of Kurdish uprising. During the Cold War this was more or less contained within Turkish borders. The two wars with Iraq (in 1991 and the current one) led the international aspects of the problem to resurface. In this respect, the Turkish decision not to allow American troops to pass through Turkish soil was unfortunate. It exposed the new ill-fated reality of Turkey’s declining importance for the US.

This is why the Kurdish struggle in Iraq raised such a reaction inside Turkey, and why alleged Israeli operations among the Kurds in Iraq, was seen as an internal threat in Turkey and as an unacceptable intervention of Israel in Turkish security affairs.<sup>10</sup> The newly adopted principles advocated by Erdoğan that denied exclusivity of good relations to one country, was seen as a Turkish privilege, not to be exercised by Israel in its possible relations with the Kurds in Iraq. Turkish concerns were leaked conveniently by the Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül to the American journalist Seymour Hersh with the aim to both warn Israel but also to convince the Turkish secular public opinion that AKP’ attitude towards Israel was justified.<sup>11</sup> This episode illuminates both the internal tension underlying Turkey’s position, and the new tones towards Israel.

Israel found itself in need to face new realities as the result of the war in Iraq as well. American interests in the area are starting to indicate that Israel will soon have to address its relations with the Arabs in general and with the Palestinians in particular.

---

<sup>10</sup> Paul Scham, “Israeli-Turkish Relations: New Directions,” *MEI (Middle East Institute) Perspective*, August 20, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Seymour Hersh, “Annals of National Security. Plan B,” *The New Yorker*, June 21, 2004.

In the past, researchers were accustomed to examine the relationship with Turkey through the Turkish prism, and to a certain degree were right in so doing. This is because Israel was in a desperate need to be recognized by a Muslim, non-Arab country in order to diffuse the religious element of its relations with the Arabs. The end of the Cold War left Israel with new needs and realities in which it needs to face its Arab surroundings and to finally put to rest the dated ‘periphery alliance’ security concept. An “alliance” with Turkey, while still much desired, will not solve Israel’s major security problem. Turkey’s offer to assume its new self declared role as a regional power by acting as a broker between the Palestinians and other Arab states and Israel were not seriously considered. Israel has traditionally rejected both European and other attempts to assume roles in the Middle East peace process. Turkey is incapable, so it is argued by Israeli foreign officials, in spite of its insistence, to act as a broker between Israel and the fragmented Muslim world. From an Israeli perspective the US is the only country that is capable of playing a negotiating role and to provide the necessary guaranties. The Israeli position on this issue is firm, though polite. Turkey’s assumption of a new regional role was somewhat premature.

Turkey’s reaction to the rejection was unforgiving, although to a certain extent was also misunderstood in Israel. This may be a fascinating case for researchers on the importance of language and culture in foreign relations. While Turkey was aiming to gain western support and recognition, as a country with potential mediating power in the area, many in Israel explained Erdoğan’s disappointed, fuming reaction either within the framework of oriental honor or Islamic anti-Israeli inclinations.

Erdoğan’s sharply worded rhetoric towards Prime Minister Sharon was surely excessive, perhaps aimed at internal party audience. Arguably, it may have also hinted at a remnant of a “municipal” style that has carried over into the AKP leader’s management of foreign policy. But most of all, it highlighted the objective difficulties, the result of the opposing directions the two countries were headed. The lack of progress in signing defense industry projects, one of Israel’s major foreign policy goals since the 1970s, the harsh criticism in the Turkish media of Israeli attitudes towards the Palestinians, along with the emergence of conflicting regional interests over the question of Iraq’s integrity are all obstacles in the relationship between the two countries. While these are serious problems that should not be ignored, the Turkish foreign policy “third option” position will not improve the situation, and to a certain extent seems unrealistic.

The attempts of AKP foreign ministry circles to initiate a new foreign policy strategy, is ironically sometimes in tune with the American and Israeli world of beliefs with regard to the nature of Turkish Islam and society. American institutions have many Turkish experts, entrepreneurs, foreign policy advisers and others that work closely with the State Department. Most of them are secular, with a very different background from that of the current ruling elite in Turkey. Official speeches of American diplomats reveal that most of them, while aware of the ideological changes strongly believe and prefer the positives of old Kemalist theories and historical versions that are irrelevant to contemporary Turkish society. Their views, echoed in Israeli institutions and foreign policy circles, are best expressed in the discussion over the possible Turkish accession to the EU.

Both the US and Israel strongly support Turkey's entry to the EU, in spite of the alarming signals of deteriorating relations. The reasons for this support vary and largely have to do with the US concerns over the enlargement and strengthening of Europe as a political entity. Washington regards the presence of Britain, and in the future Turkey, inside the crystallizing EU as a check on possible European superpower aspirations. This policy is unlikely to change in the near future, and US and Israeli official support is guaranteed for what they consider a global consideration. Decoding "global considerations" reveals a strong belief that Turkish Islam is different than Arab, Iranian or fundamentalist Islam and that it may serve as an immunization against militant political Islam. It is also feared that if the EU were to reject Turkey it would provoke an onerous alternative, with Turkey descending 'into the darkness of the medieval Islamic East.'

Indeed, the issue of Turkish Islam is an important element in Turkish relations with both the US and Israel. It is viewed as an obstacle but also as an advantage, when in the background Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' prophesies loom large. The Islamic threat has been an 'on' and 'off' phenomenon in Turkey since the early 1980s. Khomeini's revolution in neighboring Iran did a great deal to send chills down the spines of leaders in the Middle East and across the Atlantic. Turkey's generals played the Islamic card for years in their efforts to rally further western support for their role in Turkish politics. There was no better way than to emphasize the difference between *revolutionary Shiite Iran* on one hand, and *quietist Sunni Turkey*. This argument was used to justify the continuation of the generals' involvement in politics as was evident in the overthrowing of a popularly elected prime minister, the first who was openly Islamist, Necmettin Erbakan in 1997.

Alas, seven years later Turkey has its second Islamist Prime Minister, unprecedented parliamentary stability, economic growth, legal and social reforms, and still Islamic threat is on the agenda! Still, many in the US repeatedly warned that if Turkey is not admitted as an equal into the EU it was likely to turn east. This argument is often repeated. But, is this really an option for Turkey? And if so, what 'east' are we talking about?

Without doubt, the American and Israeli nightmare scenario is that Turkey will turn into an Islamic republic. The chances of that happening, however, are slim. The circumstances that brought about the success and eventual establishment of Khomeini's regime in Iran are simply not to be found in Turkey. The AKP government has a clear Islamic agenda but the political topography is very different, and the institutions of democracy, westernization and liberalism have taken root in Turkey –albeit not always as firmly as they should be.

Secondly, what is it, that the east offers, or more precisely, who is it in the east that offers Turkey what the west does? It is the west that underwrites IMF loans for Turkey, and it is with the west that Turkish trade flourishes. It is western firms that have offices and factories in Turkey, and it is European tourists who flock to Turkish resorts. It is unlikely that in the near future Turkey will enjoy even remotely the same level of investment from the 'east.'

A different but related argument, extensively used in the Turkish press and by Turkish professors of political science, and echoed in US circles, is that entering the European

club will restrain the expansion of radical religious movements already existing in Turkey. It is also argued that within the pluralist and liberal European atmosphere, the Turks will overcome such radical movements and will become an enlightened Muslim model for others to follow.

It is hard, practically impossible, to guess what will happen in 20 years, however, researchers that dealt with the cause for the return of religion to the mainstream political stage in Turkey, demonstrate that only under centralized and non-democratic regimes, were religion kept out the public political sphere. During relatively pluralist and open periods, when peripheral traditions enjoyed legitimacy, the oppressive mechanisms of patriarchal communities, among them religious oriented societies, increase and flourish. This is not to argue that Turkey will necessarily become more Islamic in the process, but certainly there is neither an historical nor academic basis for the reverse argument.

Rational evaluation and discussion of where Turkey's future lies has been distorted by the general atmosphere of hysteria regarding anything Muslim, and a mix up in priorities between what the US and the EU needs, and what Turkey wants. It also may take time before a coherent discourse, free of Islamophobia, can take place.

Nonetheless, US foreign policy is not determined merely by regional experts or considerations. There are important principles and global reflection that the US will continue to consider. One example is the US attitude toward Cyprus. In spite of the strong pro-Turkish stand of the US government on the Annan plan, and the repeated declarations in favor of ending the isolation of the self declared northern Turkish republic, the US administration will not overstep its own commitment to international laws and will not give a hand to a precedent-setting move against international law and United Nations principles. Israel is unlikely to do so as well.

More problematic is the conflict of interests that emerged between the US and Israel on one hand, and Turkey on the other over the future of Iraq. While Turkey opposed the US invasion and fears the implication of the invasion on the establishment of Kurdish autonomy, Israel supported the invasion and under the new Iraqi circumstances, may benefit from better relations with the Kurds. The war on Iraq created a second Shi'a state in the Middle East. The only way to guarantee a secular constitution and reasonable working system is by cooperation with the Kurds. Turkey's decision not to allow the US military to pass through its soil distorted the strategic position – and what was once Turkey's strongest advantage is now a Kurdish gain. The Kurds, and not Turkey, are now seen as what stands between American success and failure in Iraq. While many in Turkey feel today that the US is "punishing" Turkey for its decisions, it is more likely that the Iraqi reality enforces this new American policy. In addition, the policy on Iraq is being managed directly from the White House and not from the State Department. The Kurdish provinces are being handled closely by the Pentagon, due to its requirements and understanding of Iraqi security challenges. While the differences in approach between the Pentagon and the White House team may not be wide, on the ground, from a Turkish perspective, it is extremely troubling.

Finally, when judging the future directions of the relationship between Turkey, Israel and the US, it may be argued that Aras is right that the picture is more complicated

than was previously assumed. One reason for this is that we are also facing a period of extensive and rapid globalization in which civil societies gain increasingly greater footing in areas which were in the past dominated by the state mechanism. The Turkish understanding of this new age, and the quest to establish a non committed third option in its foreign policy orientation have so far harmed its relations with both the US and Israel. The only arena where this policy made gains is on the domestic front. However, this may prove to be insufficient in the future. The relationship between Turkey, Israel and the US in the future may also be influenced by other new developments in the international arena that are currently being initiated, such as the future role of NATO as well as Europe in the Middle East. Such involvement of a major force may undermine Turkish importance and will illuminate the irrelevance of a third option.