

TURKEY AS A NATO PARTNER: REALITY VS. RHETORIC

This paper aims to provide a critical assessment of the rhetoric used by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) towards the United States and the NATO. In addition, the analysis aims to shed light on Turkish public opinion polls reflecting views about Turkey's alliance with the West. The ultimate goal is to compare and contrast the rhetoric employed by the AKP vis-à-vis Turkey's NATO membership and the decisions that it has actually taken in that capacity. As it will be revealed, there seems to be a correlation between the quite-often used negative rhetoric of the current government and the public opinion towards the United States and the NATO. Nevertheless, these trends are at odds with the major decisions that the AKP government has undertaken recently, namely placing a NATO radar in eastern Turkey or contributing to major NATO operations such as in Libya and Afghanistan. This paper will also look into other Western, non-NATO-led diplomatic and international initiatives to complement the analysis.

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Turkish Public Opinion: Persistent Negativity towards the U.S. and the West

Turkish public opinion has been quite unfavorable towards the U.S. in the last decade. Since the U.S. is the leading power in NATO, many Turks tend to associate Turkey's NATO membership and the country's relations with the United States. Therefore, it is only normal to draw some similarities between the two trends – namely the negative Turkish public opinion towards the U.S. and lessening public support towards NATO.

The latest German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Survey notes that “although Turkish feelings for the EU and United States warmed somewhat over the past year, a majority of Turks still view the EU and the United States unfavorably. However, the plurality of Turks thought that working with the countries of the Middle East was more important to their economic and security interests than working with countries of the EU.”¹ The same report also showed that “a plurality of Turks (27 percent) said that their country should act alone in foreign affairs, while one-in-five said it should act in closest cooperation with the countries of the Middle East (20 percent) or the countries of the EU (19 percent). There was a ten-point increase in the percentage of Turks who thought Turkish membership in the EU would be a good thing (48 percent), but such support remained much lower than it was in 2004 (73 percent).” A significant percentage of the Turks considered Turkey's neighbors in the Middle East as more important to the country's economic interests (43 percent) and security interests (42 percent) than the countries of EU.

According to this survey, in the European region, “the Turks were the least supportive of the United States, with only 30 percent holding a favorable view and 62 percent holding an unfavorable view. However, when compared with last year, the percentage of Turks favoring the United States increased by eight percentage points and those who held a very unfavorable opinion dropped by 11 points. President Obama's handling of international policies also suffered a significant blow, in the public eye, as it dropped from 50 percent (2009) to 23 percent (2010) and up to 30 percent (2011) –still almost at half of the support two years ago. On the other hand, Turks were the least supportive of the EU, with a majority (53 percent) holding unfavorable views. Still, the percentage of Turks who held favorable views of the EU increased by five points over last year's results.”²

According to the GMF report, “the plurality of Turks (34 percent) described current relations between the United States and Turkey as bad, with 28 percent saying ties were mixed and 27 percent saying they were good. Among Turks, 62 percent had an unfavorable opinion of the United States. But the intensity of that

¹ “German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Trends Survey 2011: Topline Data,” *Transatlantic Trends*, 14 September 2011, <http://trends.gmfus.org/transatlantic-trends/topline-data/>.

² *Ibid.*

anti-Americanism has subsided somewhat. This year, 38 percent of Turks had a very unfavorable opinion of the United States, an 11 percentage point drop since 2010.” Many experts believe that a lack of major international crisis in 2011 led to this improvement. Opinions worsened in previous years after events such as the flotilla incident or Turkey’s rejection of UN sanctions against Iran.

Turkey Continues to Be the NATO Country with Lowest Support for NATO

The Transatlantic Trends survey in 2010 also showed a significant drop in Turkish public support for NATO. “Asked specifically about NATO’s importance to their own security in 2004, the majority of Turks (53 percent) found NATO essential – somewhat less but still similar to support in the U.S. (62 percent) and the EU (64 percent) at the time. Since then, support for NATO has remained largely unchanged in the other countries surveyed, but Turkish support has eroded drastically to less than one-in-three (30 percent) in 2010.”³

According to the GMF, ‘among the EU NATO members, those who said NATO was essential for their country’s security ranged from a high of 73 percent in the Netherlands to a low of 51 percent in Poland. As in past years, Turkey was the NATO member with the lowest support for NATO, with only 37 percent saying that NATO is essential.’⁴

The Western-led intervention in Libya, which was eventually taken over by NATO also provides some insight into how those countries’ public view NATO. According to the GMF report, ‘the United States (59 percent), France (58 percent), and the UK (53 percent), all of which spearheaded the military intervention from the beginning, showed majority levels of public support for the effort. Sweden (69 percent) and the Netherlands (65 percent), countries that began to contribute militarily after NATO took control of the operation, were the ones most likely to approve of international forces intervening in Libya. Turkey, despite participating militarily in Libya, had the lowest level of approval for the international intervention, with only 23 percent approving and 64 percent disapproving. It is, however, important to note that 54 percent of Turks supported intervening to protect civilians but only 25 percent supported sending ground troops to assist the rebels who oppose Gaddafi.’⁵ This shows that Turks were in favor of protecting the civilians but were rather reluctant to provide the troops necessary to carry out such mission.

When Erdoğan was visiting Macedonia at the end of September, speaking at a graduation ceremony for the International Balkan University in Skopje, he said that

³ “German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Trends Survey 2010,” *Transatlantic Trends 2010*, September 2010, http://trends.gmfus.org/doc/2010_English_Top.pdf.

⁴ “German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Trends Survey 2011: Topline Data,” *Transatlantic Trends*, 14 September 2011, http://trends.gmfus.org/publications_/TT/TTS2011Toplines.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

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“imperialist forces” would never give up their desires. “There will always be an oppressor and those oppressed. It all began with the emergence of the first human being and will go on until the end. What is crucial is to be aware of such a reality and fight against oppression,” he continued. According to Erdoğan, there are a number of countries struggling to facilitate alliances between civilizations and there are also other countries that

make efforts to get civilizations to fight each other.⁶

In a recent televised speech to the Turkish public, Erdoğan criticized “the international world for failing to take responsibility and acting weak in face of world problems.” He also argued that “international organizations such as the United Nations only act for the benefit of a few powerful countries and choose to do so in geographies that have oil reserves or any other material benefit to Western countries.” He called on the world “to rid the world of such ideologies with double standards.” He also criticized Israel, whom he had previously called the spoiled boy of the West, for placing great trust on the West, which ignores all of Israeli mistakes.”⁷

AKP Scorecard and Turkish-American Relations Going-Forward

Even though major polls in Turkey show a consistent and persistent anti-American sentiment, AKP definitely seems to be aware that being a strong U.S. partner is critical for its success in the international arena. Prime Minister Erdoğan and other AKP high-level officials often employ anti-Western rhetoric but this does not really translate into action – at least, it has not to date.

Many people refer to the failure of resolution on 1 March 2003 – which proposed the allowance of American troops to carry out a ground operation through Turkey into Iraq- as a breakdown in Turkish-American bilateral relations. Even though AKP had a significant majority in the parliament, it failed to secure the necessary two thirds of the votes to pass the resolution. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Turkey provided the majority of the support the U.S. needed except allowing U.S. troops in its territory despite a lack of parliamentarian resolution on Iraq. According to the U.S. State Department, 74 percent of all air cargo into Iraq has transited through İncirlik base in Adana, Turkey, which also is a primary refueling

⁶ “PM Erdoğan speaks against ‘imperialist forces’ in Skopje,” *Today’s Zaman*, 30 September 2011, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&newsId=258438&link=258438.

⁷ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, *Milliyet Daily*, 3 October 2011.

stop for flights to Afghanistan. Turkey also played an important role in Northern Iraq through vast investments and increased bilateral relations. Even if a formal resolution failed in March 2003, AKP acted as if the resolution had actually passed.

With the exception of the 2003 resolution, it is fair to say that AKP has assisted the U.S. virtually in every major occasion since it came to power in 2002.

NATO Missile Defense System

Turkey long resisted placing a NATO radar on its soil. However, it finally signed onto the NATO system by agreeing to place U.S. radar on 2 September 2011, the same day it downgraded its diplomatic relationship with Israel. The memorandum to deploy an X-band radar system at a military base in the eastern province of Malatya was signed on 14 September 2011 by Turkish Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Feridun Sınırlıoğlu and the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Francis Ricciardone. While AKP officials claim that the intelligence gathered by this system will not be shared with Israel, U.S. officials actually say the opposite. According to Paul Richter of Los Angeles Times, “a NATO official made it clear that if the radar was not placed in Turkey, then, it would be put in another country nearby, which, according to the official, was the convincing punch-line for the AKP government.” Richter also adds that “U.S. officials say they stay in close touch with Turkey, in part to avoid surprises. Last year, for example, Pentagon officials were alarmed to learn that Turkey had conducted military exercises with China, with no advance notice, raising questions about its plans with NATO.”

Libya

Erdoğan had initially opposed a NATO intervention in Libya but subsequently realized that he would be confronting a strong international coalition if he did not change strategies. On 14 March 2011, he said: “We have seen from other examples that foreign interventions, especially military interventions, only deepen the problem. Therefore, we see a NATO military intervention in another country as extremely unbeneficial, and, moreover, we are concerned that it could create dangerous results.”⁸ Only a little more than a week later, Turkey dispatched navy ships and a submarine to help enforce the arms embargo against Libya.

Syria

A similar scenario was to occur in Syria months later. Erdoğan realized a strong international alliance led by the U.S. signaled that it could be the beginning of

⁸ Jonathan Head, “Turkey opposes any NATO operation in Libya,” *BBC*, 25 March 2011, <http://bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-africa-12864742>.

the end for Syria's *Bashar* al-Assad -a man whom Erdoğan called a brother and had grown close to over the years. The AKP government again shifted gears and started calling for change in Syria. AKP officials even stated that Assad had 'lied' to them about executing domestic reforms and failed to implement them. As Erdoğan has moved closer to the Western position on Syria by calling for a regime change, this caused friction with Iran. Even though future implications are not certain at this point, some analysts reason the increased PKK attacks after Erdoğan's change of heart with Syria.

Afghanistan

Turkey has deployed troops to NATO operations in Afghanistan since 2001 and assumed the command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) twice, in 2002 and 2005. Turkey also led the Kabul Regional Command (RCC) for eight months in 2007. Furthermore, on 1 November 2009, once more, Turkey assumed responsibility for the RCC. Upon the request of NATO to extend this term for one more year, Turkey decided to prolong its term in command of the RCC until 1 November 2011. "As a result of the Turkish Armed Forces' success and the close ties it forged with the Afghan people, NATO authorities asked Turkey to continue the leadership of RCC until 1 November 2012"

In many instances, recently, one can see that Erdoğan has been quite pragmatic and quick to change strategies if needed – which a number of observers both in and out of Turkey view as flip-flopping. A high-level State Department official said, "AKP may have been slow on certain foreign policy issues but they have definitely come on board later on. And this is what matters."⁹ Many different sources also confirm President Obama's special affection for Erdoğan, to whom he placed the highest amount of personal phone calls throughout this year. The fact that Obama spent more than 1.5 hours with Erdoğan at the occasion of the 66th regular session of the General Assembly in New York is also another indicator for this fond relationship between the two leaders.

The two major potential points of friction between the U.S. and Turkey are the problems in Turkey's relationship with Israel and the U.S. strategy towards containment of the Iranian regime. Despite its harsh rhetoric against Israel, the AKP government seems rather cautious not to cause a confrontation similar to the one during the Mavi Marmara incident. A second Gaza flotilla was initially planned to sail on the anniversary of the first flotilla on 31 May 2011. For some 'technical reasons,' the departure was delayed until the end of June, and, then, it never took place. Many circles in Ankara believe that this was prevented by AKP after strong U.S. pressure not to incite any further tension with Israel. Many also believe that

⁹ Author's discussion with a high level U.S. State Department official on September 2011.

the departure was initially delayed until after Turkish national elections on 12 June 2011, in order to be used as an election tool. Relations between Turkey and Israel have further been estranged after Turkey downgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel on 2 September 2011 and called for the United Nations to recognize an independent Palestine two weeks later at the U.N. Assembly in New York.

Having little more than only a year to go until the next Presidential elections, the next twelve months will be interesting as to how President Obama will maintain the delicate balance between the two allies –Israel and Turkey– and whether he will succeed in repairing the relations between the two. Domestic U.S. politics in an election year will certainly further complicate this situation. President Obama and Secretary Clinton both asked their Turkish counterparts to repair relations with Israel publicly and privately. The Israeli lobby will certainly leverage its influence to ensure that Israel is not further isolated in the region. Even though Erdoğan insists on three conditions to be met before mending relations with Israel (apology over deaths in flotilla, compensation for the victims, and lifting the Gaza blockade), he may change his position as he did in policies towards Libya and Syria. It will definitely be an interesting year in the triangular relationship of U.S., Turkey, and Israel.

Conclusion: Rhetoric vs. Reality

The examples above demonstrate that the rhetoric of Erdoğan and the ruling-AKP are in contrast with their actual decisions vis-à-vis the Western world. Despite the often-used anti-Western rhetoric that certainly plays a role in deepening the negative Turkish public opinion towards the West, Erdoğan is careful not to undermine any major Western diplomatic or foreign policy initiative. This was seen clearly in the case of Libya, the NATO Missile Defense System, Syria, and other cases.

Even though Erdoğan criticizes Western intervention in certain parts of the world as ‘imperialist’ or ‘solely-driven for material benefit,’ he actually continues to support those interventions in an active manner. His criticism with such an anti-Western tone contradicts the very positions that Erdoğan himself takes.

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Given the high popularity that he garnered as a leader, many see him as tough and stubborn; but Erdoğan falls in the trap of painting a portrait that is far from the reality -in other words, he simply does not practice what he preaches.

Turkish people are emotional and can be influenced by their leaders. With a political leader who virtually receives half of the votes in the country continuously using such an anti-Western rhetoric, it would be unrealistic to expect any significant positive turnaround in the public opinion towards the West.

As Erdoğan's rhetoric and actions continue to diverge, he risks losing credibility. At the end of the day, he may have to choose who he really is: a leader who is ready to confront any power regardless of the price, or a pragmatic leader who switches positions as conditions change. Playing both sides will sure not be sustainable.