

Turkey as a Regional Player

April 2011

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The New Turkey

On the 12th of September 2010 Turkey went to the polls for an historic ideological referendum. Fifty Eight percent of the Turkish voters said “Yes” to a new legislation downgrading the status of Turkey’s armed forces in Turkish civilian life, and strengthening certain internal Islamization trends. It will not be an enormous exaggeration to state that the Turkish public decided to further shake the foundations of Kemalism (Ataturk’s secular ideological legacy) to prepare the ground for the adoption of a different ideology, gradually shaped by its contemporary leader – Recep Tayyip Eerdogan. These internal ideological changes are accompanied by an emotional and heated internal debate, much of it focusing on Erdogan’s character, behavior and long-term goals.

The ideological rift inside Turkey’s society and the gradual Islamization process, did not prevent a meaningful economic recovery during Erdogan’s eight years in power. Turkey moved from a highly volatile economy to a relatively stable one as the chronic double digit inflation decreased substantially. Erdogan reined in government spending, sold state-owned companies in a volume of 30 billion dollars and opened trade doors for Turkish business to triple the annual export volume in the last seven years. Turkey’s economy lived through an average annual growth of over 4.5 % since Erdogan was first elected in November 2002. The traditional modernization and globalization trends adopted long before Erdogan came to power are still very vivid.

If Erdogan will win the coming (June 2011) general elections, he might become the longest serving prime minister in the history of the Turkish republic since Adnan Menderes, who ruled the country during the 1950’s for ten consecutive years.

Turkey in the Middle East

The new Turkish “Erdoganism” did not introduce only internal changes. It gradually became very obvious that Erdogan’s foreign policy, and especially Middle Eastern policy, is undergoing dramatic changes. The elections of July 2007 ended with a great political victory for Erdogan and his AK Party (47% of the overall vote). Not less important was the fact that Ergdogan has “captured” the Turkish presidency and placed his old-time political partner, Abdullah Gul, in the Cankaya presidential palace. Soon after, Erdoagn appointed another friend and colleague, Ahmet Davutoglu, as Turkey’s foreign minister.

The above mentioned personal changes in Turkey’s top leadership made Erdogan much stronger politically, and as a result, more aggressive in implementing massive changes in Turkey’s internal as well as external policies. Erdogan’s second term in office looks quite different ideologically than his first term (2003-2007).

The appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu brought about a new foreign policy philosophy according to which Turkey is not only a pro-western player in the international arena, but rather an “all-around player” active in all the different neighborhoods the country is bordering, from the Balkan, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East and the Mediterranean. The Arab-Israeli conflict looked to Turkey as the most threatening conflict it should quickly get involved in because of its violent nature.

The years 2009-2010 could already be described as the worst years in the relations between Turkey and Israel during the last two decades. This statement does not refer to the volume of economic or cultural ties between the two countries, but rather to the political relations on the

highest level. The year 2009 knew very frequent critical (sometimes brutal) Turkish statements against Israel and its policies, which had a harmful, if not devastating, impact on the existing atmosphere between Ankara and Jerusalem. The vast majority of these Turkish attacks came directly, on record, from the Turkish Prime Minister, Erdogan, and had their immediate impact on the Turkish media and from there on to the Turkish public opinion.

Turkey-Syria-Iran-Iraq

The Turkish-Syrian rapprochement started in 1999 three years before Erdogan came to power, but his government upgraded the bilateral relations between Ankara and Damascus to the level of a Turkish-Syrian alliance.

Since the first-ever Syrian presidential visit to Turkey in January 2004, things started rolling very fast: Frequent high level visits on both sides; growing amount of trade and aid; the establishment of military ties; joint military exercises and recently even the mutual removal of the need for visas for citizens of each of the countries.

The Turkish-Syrian relations that looked eleven years ago as being on the verge of an overall war, look today as stronger than ever before. Turkey is assisting President Bashar Assad with his internal economic difficulties and is meaningfully contributing to his growing recognition in the western world and even in the Middle East..

Turkey's relations with Iran and Iraq were always largely effected by the fact that the three countries are sharing long common borders, and are hosting together about 90% of the Kurdish people. In addition, Turkey's massive dependence on these two neighbors for its expending energy needs, was also a meaningful factor. Their mutual dependence grew as a result of Turkey's decision to turn itself into a major oil and gas transporter. As a result, Turkey is not only importing a substantial part of its own oil and gas needs from Iran and Iraq, it also became the main land transporter of oil and gas from these two countries to Europe, largely benefiting from this income. Turkey developed as a result an ongoing interest in the Iranian and Iraqi economies and expanded its trade with these two countries.

Turkey has always had strong reservations about the Iraq war that was launched in 2003, yet Turkey gradually became one of the biggest beneficiaries of this war. New York Times claimed recently (January 4, 2011) that the two-way trade



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between Turkey and Iraq doubled between 2008 and 2010 from 3\$ billion to 6\$ billion. Turkish businessmen have established a strong presence in Erbil, the capital of northern Iraq, where 15,000 Turks and 700 Turkish companies are active at the moment and 1500 Turkish troops are stationed.

This is not the only reason why Turkey keeps upgrading its already good relations with Iran and Iraq. This trend also fits very well the new foreign policy guidelines of a “Zero Trouble” policy in the region that is aiming at the creation of good and healthy working relations with all of Turkey’s neighbors, especially eastward. As a result we could recently see high level Turkish visits to both Iran and Iraq reciprocated by high level visits of Iranians and Iraqi leaders to Turkey. During these visits a series of additional economic deals were signed. Turkey was also deeply involved in diplomatic attempts to bridge the gaps between Iran and the western powers regarding Iran’s nuclear ambitions..

Turkey-Israel

In sharp contrast to the strengthening of Turkey’s regional status and its growing influence in the Islamic and Arab world, the Israeli-Turkish bond, so meaningful and stable during the 1990’s, is under severe pressure at the moment. Turkey’s leadership could already be seen as much closer to Teheran and Damascus than to Jerusalem. Erdogan himself feels much more comfortable in the company of radical Moslem leaders than in the company of Israel’s top leadership.

The “Special Relationships”

The 1990’s were an unprecedented and unusual decade in the history of the bilateral Israeli-Turkish relations. It started with the 1991 Madrid peace conference that led to the upgrading of the Ankara-Jerusalem diplomatic link to an ambassadorial level; it was then followed by the 1993 Oslo declaration of principles that completely broke the ice between the two countries and triggered high level visits on both sides, resulting in a series of military and economic agreements. In early 1996 both countries signed a free trade agreement, followed by a decision to grant Israel a contract to upgrade 170 Turkish battlefield tanks. The 1990’s also witnessed a constant increase in the volume of Israeli tourism to Turkey and a meaningful increase in mutual civilian bilateral trade. After the August 1999 horrific earthquake in the Istanbul region, Israel was quick to massively and effectively help the survivors.

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First Cracks

The first decade of the 21st century seems a very different one for the relations between Turkey and Israel. In November 2002 Recep Tayip Erdogan, overwhelmingly won the Turkish elections. One year after his nomination as Prime Minister, Erdogan started frequently describing the Israeli policy towards the Palestinians as "state terrorism", deeply annoyed mainly by the Israeli killing of the two senior Hamas leaders: Yasin and Rantisi, in March and April 2004. Things continued to go wrong during 2005-6 as large water projects that were granted to Israeli companies in South-East Turkey were cancelled. Turkish media stories accused Israel for granting military assistance to the Kurds in Northern Iraq. During 2007 two major Jewish organizations in the United States, decided to change their traditional approach towards the Armenian 1915-16 tragedy, defining it, for the first time, as "genocide" and triggering, by doing so, Turkish protests to Jerusalem.

On top of all this, in September 2007 another grave incident occurred between the two countries. Not only that Israel attacked Syria with its aircrafts in unexplained circumstances; on their way back the Israeli pilots violated the Turkish airspace, without any notification or explanation. Turkey's foreign minister publicly defined the Israeli attack as "unacceptable" and Turkish officials expressed their anger through the diplomatic channels.

However, even the Israeli attack on Syrian did still not cease Israeli-Turkish political ties. During 2007 Turkey was already secretly mediating between Syria and Israel. The talks were surfaced in a joint Syrian-Israeli-Turkish statement on the 18th of May 2008, revealing that teams representing the three countries are seating in Turkey and negotiating. These negotiations lasted about six months only.

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Operation “Cast lead” and its aftermath

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This Davos incident marked the beginning of a meaningful political crisis between the two countries. Erdogan launched through out 2009 a series of verbal attacks on Israel and its policies: he suggested for instance that Israel will be expelled from the UN and that the Israeli nuclear abilities will be examined parallel to the Iranian ones. Israel was not allowed to participate in an international military exercise in Turkey (to which it was invited earlier) and a TV series in Turkey’s official television channel (TRT) showed Israeli soldiers intentionally killing Palestinian civilians, including children.

Shortly after the news about the TRT TV series reached Israel, the Turkish ambassador, Ahmet Oguz Celikol was summoned to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem. The meeting, on the 11th of January 2010, turned to be an embarrassing event. Deputy Minister Ayalon seated Ambassador Celikol on a low sofa, intentionally humiliating him. Anti Israeli demonstrations in Turkey’s streets indicated that the tension at the top leadership has infiltrated to the Turkish public. As huge plaque showing Israel’s President, Shimon Peres, bowing on his knee in front of PM Erdogan, shocked the Israelis.

The “Mavi Marmara” Affair - Turkey Pulls Back its Ambassador.

During the early morning hours of the 31st of May, 2010, the worst crisis ever in the history of the relations between Turkey and Israel occurred. The Turkish ship “Mavi Marmara”, sent by a Turkish non-governmental organization, and carrying over 500 pro-Palestinian activists, was raided by the Israeli defense forces, while trying to break the siege on Gaza. Nine of the Turkish activists were killed and few tens were injured. Some of the Israeli soldiers were injured as well. The clash triggered a wave of additional anti-Israeli protests in Turkey and this time also a big wave of anti Turkish public anger in Israel. The Turkish Ambassador was called back to Ankara and the embassy is since headed by a charge d'affairs.

The aggressive Turkish policy toward Israel is partially a result of the eastward trend that brought Turkey much closer to the Islamic world. However, this trend is not in itself sufficient to bring such a major crisis in the relations with Israel. Erdogan’s disappointment from Israel’s recent policies regarding the peace process, with the Palestinians and the Syrians, seems to be another reason for the ongoing crisis with Israel. The Turkish Prime Minister has completely indexed Turkey’s bilateral relations with Israel to the progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process, and the fact that the process is completely frozen has its share in the deteriorating bilateral link.

Does Turkey have a Euro-Asian Option?

The new Middle Eastern Turkish realities have dramatically changed its regional status, Turkey has become during the last three years a regional power involved in almost every major political development in the region whether it is involving Iran, Syria, Lebanon or the Israeli-Arab conflict. The fact that Turkey has positioned itself in addition as a major energy transporter from the energy producer in the East to the consumer in the West, has further strengthened its bargaining position toward the major oil and gas suppliers, especially Iraq and Iran.

This development is complementary to a great extent to the fact that Turkey has accumulated major economic and cultural achievements in its relations with the central Asian countries. Several of these countries have a lot in common with Turkey and its people. Thousands of students from these central Asian republics are studying in Turkish universities and the major Turkish TV channels are been shown on their

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screens. Some of these countries (especially Azerbaijan) became oil exporters during the last decade and preferred to use Turkey as their corridor to the west, turning, by doing so, the economic-cultural link with turkey into a strategic one.

The geographic strip stretching from the ex-Soviet republics on Turkey's north-east to the Persian Gulf Islamic counties on its south-east, has turned Turkey (that was once considered a potential east-west bridge) into an important north-south bridge. Turkey found a common language with the secular ex-soviet republics on its north as well as with the conservative Islamist countries to its east and south. This became possible as Turkey was seen secular and democratic enough by its northern neighbors, and Islamic and conservative enough by its southern ones. The fact that wide energy win-win co-operation was created by turkey with its north and its south simultaneously, has positioned the Turks not only as a meaningful Middle Eastern player, but also as an important Central Asian, or even Euro-Asian player.

Turkey's growing political, strategic and economic links in this Euro-Asian strip stretching from the Caspian sea to the Persian Gulf, positions Turkey as a potential leader of this geographic environment including Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan on one end , and Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan on the other. The strong Turkish economic ties that are being built with Russia and the Ukraine are making these regional changes even more interesting and meaningful.

Is this Eastern Turkish option real? Could it one day become an alternative option to the one still preferred by the Turkish government – joining the European Union? Ten years ago the answer would be definitely negative. It is not negative any more. The Euro-Asian Turkish option looks more feasible with every year passing under Turkey's existing circumstances - political stability and impressive economic growth. The recent difficulties Turkey's EU relations make this option more realistic than ever before in all 87 years of the modern Turkish republic.



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What does this mean for Israel?

As things look at the moment, Israel is not included in the Turkish Euro-Asian vision. The other way around, Turkey is building an Islamic quartet, a Turkish-Syrian-Lebanese-Jordanian alliance, based on an economic and cultural integration of these four countries, further isolating Israel in the region and leaving Egypt as its only meaningful partner in the Middle East.

These new realities have already created serious cracks in the moderate pro-American/Pro-Western group of countries in the Middle East. It looked until not long ago as if this group could once accept Israel, especially if things would move toward more Israeli-Arab political understandings. The fact that the talks between Israel and its Palestinian and Syrian neighbors are on halt, is further strengthening the radical block in the region that is largely benefitting from the growing anti-Israeli sentiments.

It seems at the moment that Turkey, more than Iran or Egypt (so far the only other regional powers in the Middle East) is the key player in determining the level of acceptance and legitimization of Israel regionally. The results of Turkey's recent Middle Eastern diplomatic behavior look quite devastating for Israel's regional status.

What does all this mean for Europe?

The Turkish integration process into the European Union is entering its fifth decade. During the last ten years Turkey acted already as an official candidate for full membership, out of them the last five years within a negotiating process. The outcome still does not look promising. The progress in the negotiations is extremely slow and recently looks like losing momentum. It seems as if the framework that was so carefully structured to enable the expansion of the Union to its existing 27 countries shape, will not be able to add Turkey to the group.

A lot has changed inside Turkey and in its regional status, since it was approved (in 1999) as a candidate for EU membership and since the negotiations with the EU have started five years ago. Today's Turkey is stronger economically and a much more dominant player regionally. In Europe on the other hand, we have seen serious economic difficulties in a series of countries that ten years ago looks in a much better shape, economically and politically, than Turkey.

The contemporary European approach to Turkey should wish

to perpetuate the process of modernization, globalization and democratization still going on inside Turkey. As we have seen in this paper these are not the only trends occurring inside Turkey at the moment. Any European policy that can preserve the modernization-democratization trends should be considered. A possible European-Turkish political alliance, either in the format of the European Union or in a different mutually agreed format, will have a positive influence regarding the spread of European principles in the whole Euro-Asian region. A collapse of the Euro-Turkish dialogue on the other hand, can end up as a severe blow to the ideas United Europe is still trying to spread regionally and globally.

The author is the sole responsible for the content of this article which do not reflect the opinion of the coordinators of the IEPN project or the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

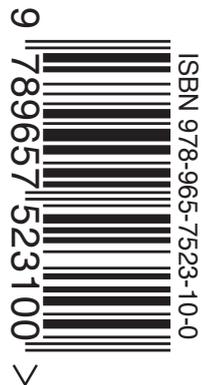
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