



**TURKEY'S CHANGING FOREIGN POLICY
AND ITS INTERNATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS**

By Efraim Inbar

Efraim Inbar is professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University and director of the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies. This essay is excerpted from his Winter 2011 Orbis article. The author acknowledges the research help of Elizabeth Stull.

Turkey's geographical location and size bestows on the state strategic importance. Indeed, Turkey carries great regional and international weight. Diverging from the West has serious consequences for the balance of power in the Greater Middle East and for global politics. Currently, the Middle East is divided between ascending Islamic Iran and its radical allies, and pro-Western moderate forces—Israel and most Arab states. Until recently, Turkey appeared to belong to the pro-Western camp, but it crossed the Rubicon when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Iran in October 2009. Turkey sided with Iran on the nuclear issue when its Foreign Minister, Davutoglu, in a meeting with Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Saeed Jalili, stressed his country's support for Tehran's "peaceful nuclear program." During the meeting held in Tehran, Ahmet Davutoglu also announced Turkey's capital Ankara's firm stance on the consolidation of ties with Tehran.¹ The relationship with Iran remains the litmus test for Turkey's Islamist leanings. During a state visit to Tehran earlier this month, the Turkish president, Abdullah Gull, declared Turkey's desire for further improvement of bilateral relations, unperturbed by the violent repression of opposition demonstrators by the Iranian regime.

With Turkey crossing over, it will be more difficult for the international community to contain Iran and curb its nuclear program. Indeed, Turkey, a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council, angered the West by refusing in March 2010 to support additional sanctions on Iran.² In June 2010, it voted against sanctions. Since Turkey borders Iran, its failure to cooperate in the economic sanctions against Iran undermines the West's policy. Ankara's current stance allows Iran to become more immune to economic pressure and enhances Iranian power in the region, which will likely prove to be Turkey's largest strategic miscalculation in the future.

Nevertheless, Erdogan's government views cooperation between Iran, Syria, and Turkey as an important element in regional stability.³ The three agree on the Kurdish issue since all fear an independent Kurdish state. The U.S. exit from Iraq brings the three even closer. They are also intent on weakening the position of Israel—perceived as a Western outpost—in the region. The political elites of the three states believe the West, and particularly the United States, to be in decline. Their common perception of President Barack Obama as very weak makes their alliance less likely to elicit costly countermeasures from a West in strategic disarray.

Turkey's shift in foreign policy will undoubtedly strengthen Iran's grip over Syria and Lebanon. The "Hizballization" of Lebanon is a corollary process, allowing Iran to establish a "Shiite corridor" to the Mediterranean. Iran will gain an even greater influence in Shiite southern Iraq after the U.S. departure and will strengthen its presence in the Levant (the Eastern Mediterranean at large) through territorial links via Iraq to Syria and Hizballah in Lebanon. Furthermore, Turkey's shift will end any Western illusions about snatching Syria away from the radical camp in order to strengthen democratic forces in Lebanon or to facilitate a peace treaty between Syria and Israel. Backed by Turkey, Syria can more easily resist Western

¹ Turkish FM: Ankara Supports Iran's Peaceful N. Activities, News number: 881128095314:35, February 17, 2010, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8811280953>

² Burak Ege Bekdil and Umit Enginsoy, "Turkey Rejects More Sanctions on Iran," March 25, 2010, www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4555173&c=MID&s=TOP.

³ H. Sabbagh, "Erdogan: Cooperation between Syria, Turkey and Iran is Important for Peace in the Region," *Syrian Arab News Agency*, October 27, 2009.

pressures and continue its alliance with Iran.

Such a development will enhance Iran's capability to project power in the Eastern Mediterranean and even further west into the Balkans, whose three Muslim states already show signs of Iranian presence. Turkey has also developed a keen interest in the Balkans—once an integral part of the Ottoman Empire. Muslim communities in European states are in constant danger of radicalization and Iranian encroachment could reinforce such a process. Similarly, northern Cyprus, occupied by Turkey since 1974, could again become a base for Muslim influence in the Mediterranean.

An Ankara-Tehran axis would pressure the pro-Western Arab states to the south. In addition to the current tensions between Egypt and Iran, hostilities are also growing between Egypt and Turkey. While Turkey's international behavior has gained sympathy on the Arab street, the pro-Western Arab leaders seem less enchanted. They view Turkey's current pro-Iranian foreign policy as extremely concerning. Egypt in particular sees the Turkish approach to the Hamas regime in Gaza as a threat to Egyptian vital interests.⁴ Moreover, Turkey's open support for the demonstrators against the Mubarak regime was seen as another indication of the Turkish attempt to weaken Egypt, a traditional rival in struggle for influence in the Middle East. The Ankara-Tehran axis that weakens the pro-U.S. Arab states, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, also hinders U.S. influence in the region, particularly when everyone expects the United States to withdraw in the near future from Iraq.

An attempted rapprochement with Armenia is part of the Turkish desire for “zero problems” with its neighbors, but it is important to recognize that Armenia receives support from Iran and Russia. The geopolitical consequence of better relations between Yerevan and Ankara is problematic. Indeed, the new, maybe temporary, Turkish-Armenian understandings have put strains on the Turkish-Azerbaijani strategic partnership.⁵ The latter alliance has been the backbone of the East-West energy corridor, and the geo-strategic balance in the region that has allowed for Turkish (or Western) entrance into the Caspian. Without the Turkish-Azerbaijani strategic partnership, Turkish, European Union and U.S. influence in the South Caucasus is at risk. Baku has feared Iranian influence and hoped that Turkey and the West could balance the proximity of Iran, whom it borders. Similarly, Georgia's pro-Western orientation is at stake. If Turkey and Russia reach an agreement over Georgia, its independence is doomed.

The change in Ankara's foreign policy similarly threatens the Central Asian states, which all have Muslim majorities as well as cultural and linguistic links to Turkey (with the exception of Tajikistan). After independence, following the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, these states adopted a pro-Western orientation and looked at Turkey as a secular model for development.⁶ If Turkey becomes an Islamist country, the pressure for Islamization from Iran (and also from Saudi Arabia) will grow in Central Asia. These states may succumb to political Islam, or alternatively, may look to regional powers, Russia or China, thereby abandoning their pro-Western orientation.

Turkey's new positioning will undoubtedly facilitate the ability of Russia to penetrate the Middle East. During the Cold War, Turkey prevented Russian divisions from pouring southward and participating in the wars conducted by its Arab allies. Thus, a Russian-Turkish alignment could expose the heart of the Middle East to greater Russian encroachment, especially since Vladimir Putin has revived the country's imperial ambitions in many regions, including in the Middle East.

If Turkey becomes increasingly Islamist, Europe could lose a great buffer from the turbulent Middle East. Indeed, if the Islamist tendencies in Turkey become entrenched, a strong Muslim revisionist state that is also an heir to the Ottoman Empire could emerge at the edge of Europe, with aspirations to extend its influence toward the West. NATO, which may reacquire an active defensive mission, would be significantly weakened by losing the Turkish army, an important component on its eastern flank. Already Turkey has shown reluctance to host U.S. interceptor missiles (part of a planned NATO collective missile defense system) for fear of upsetting Iran.⁷ NATO probably needs to adopt greater caution in sharing with Turkey sensitive information and technologies to stop potential leaks and technology transfer to Iran.

Finally, the new direction of Turkish foreign policy raises the question of whether Turkey will continue its nuclear abstinence. Granting legitimacy to Iranian nuclear aspirations might indicate a desire to emulate its nuclear behavior. Pakistan, the main source for the nuclear know-how in Iran has even better relations with Turkey. Russia has already agreed to sell a nuclear power plant. The road to a nuclear bomb is indeed a long one, but it has a starting point, which usually is not very clear.

⁴ Fulya Özerkan, “Aid convoy spurs crisis between Turkey and Egypt, *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 6, 2010, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=aid-convoy-spurs-crisis-between-turkey-and-egypt-2010-01-06>.

⁵ Fariz Ismailzade, “Azerbaijan Nervously Watching Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, September 11, 2009, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 6, Issue 166.

⁶ Daniel Pipes, “The Event of Our Era: Former Soviet Muslim Republics Change the Middle East,” in Michael Mandelbaum, ed., *In Central Asia and the World: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan* (New York: Council of Foreign Affairs, 1994).

⁷ Umit Eginsoy and Burak Eke Bekdil, *Defense News*, September 13, 2010.

Even if the nuclear appetite has not been whetted yet in Ankara, the loss of Turkey as a Western ally will inevitably become a strategic disaster even larger than the Islamic revolution in Iran.

The reorientation of Turkey's foreign policy should be of great concern to the West. Western capitals are slow in gauging the changes in the domestic and foreign politics of Turkey. Washington still plays with the idea that Ankara represents "moderate Islam." Yet, Turkey's preferences and policies are anything but moderate. Seeking good relations with Iran and Sudan, as well as with Hamas and Hizballah, puts Turkey in a radical Islamist camp. Turkey, along with Iran and other radicals, cherishes the current turmoil in the Middle East. Turkey is an important country whose foreign policy reorientation changes the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of the radical Islamist forces. It affects negatively the pro-Western orientation of the Central Asian republics. It considerably weakens the Western alliance and NATO. Turkey could also revive the historic Muslim threat to Europe from the East.

Thanks to the Islamic roots of its ruling party, Turkey is undergoing an identity crisis. At the same time, the quality of Turkish democracy is deteriorating. Hopefully, Turkish democracy will be strong enough to choose the progress and prosperity that only a Western anchor can grant. The nation is scheduled to hold elections in June 2011, and the current polls show that a secular party should become part of the next coalition government, limiting Islamist influence, despite the remarkable political skills of Erdogan. These skills helped him win the September 2010 referendum on constitutional changes, which will strengthen the AKP grip over the judiciary and the military. The West must grasp that Turkey does not represent "moderate Islam" and should do everything possible to bolster the secularist parties in order to prevent an Islamist triumph in the elections. Turkey's drift to Islamism would be a great strategic loss to Israel and the West, and a tragedy for the Turks.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.