

The Self-Appointed Superpower

TURKEY GOES
IT ALONE

PIOTR ZALEWSKI

ISTANBUL—On December 11, 1999, a remarkable summit took place in Helsinki, Finland. Fifteen European heads of state granted Turkey—a nation of nearly 75 million Muslims—the status of candidate for accession to the European Union. Eleven years later, hardly anyone in Ankara or Brussels has much reason to celebrate. Thanks to rising opposition to Turkish EU membership in Europe, fall-



ing support for its accession in Turkey, as well as Turkey's refusal to recognize Greek Cyprus, the EU process appears stuck. The arithmetic is straightforward. Turkey opened membership talks with the EU in October 2005, at exactly the same time as Croatia. Since then, Croatia has reached an agreement on 25 of 35 chapters in the negotiating process (as of November 2010); Turkey has agreed to one.

This is not to say the Turkish government has lost its appetite for change. Indeed, a new reform era—heralded by laws curbing the role of the powerful military, reining in an aggressive judiciary and extending cultural rights for Kurds—is underway. The promise of EU membership, however, is no longer the driving force behind such changes. Increasingly convinced that the EU will never open its doors to a large Muslim country like theirs, Turks have tired of reforming “for Europe’s sake.” Several years ago, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s conservative Islamic government jumped through hoops, passing one groundbreaking democratic reform after another to meet the EU’s criteria for opening accession talks. Back then, it was fashionable to speak of the EU as an “anchor” for Turkey. Tellingly, the word used today by most experts to describe Turkey’s geopolitical orientation is “adrift.” The attitude among Turks, says Cengiz Aktar, an EU expert at Bahceshir University, “is that the EU needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the EU—and that Turkey can go it alone.”

NEW FOOTING

To the extent that EU membership has ceased to be an overriding national interest—becoming one among many foreign policy alternatives—Turkey may indeed have drifted somewhat from the West and has found its footing elsewhere. Under the rule of Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party [AKP], Turkey seems to have rediscovered its neighborhood.

Early in 2002, months before a massive electoral victory swept it into power, AKP strategists produced a compact pamphlet defining their party’s political agenda. The document, promising an era of democratization, economic reform and EU membership, also contained a chapter on foreign policy. “The dynamic circumstances brought about by the post-Cold War period,” it read, “have created a suitable environment for developing a foreign policy with several alternatives.” The wording suggested what was to become a tectonic shift in Turkish foreign policy. For nearly 80 years, Turks had been told by their secularist leaders, from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk onward, that their country’s sole point of reference—culturally and geopolitically—was, is, and should be, Europe. By insisting that Turkey was as European as it was Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian and Central Asian, the AKP had launched a foreign policy revolution.

Under the watch of Ahmet Davutoglu, a former academic turned foreign minister, Turkey’s new foreign policy—dubbed the “zero problems” approach—has delivered impressive results. Relations with neighboring countries are better than at any time since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Ten years ago, when Syria refused to hand over Abdullah Öcalan, head of the separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party [PKK] and Turkey’s public enemy number one, Ankara and Damascus were on the verge of war. Last October, they signed a deal lifting mutual visa requirements. Since then, Turkey has inked similar deals with Libya, Russia, Jordan and Lebanon.

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Turkey-Iran: Bosom Buddies.

“Ours is an inclusionary foreign policy,” says Suat Kiniklioglu, the AKP’s deputy chairman for external affairs. “When other countries isolated the Syrians, we engaged with them.” He adds, with a note of triumphalism, “Today, we are happy to see that the U.S. is following suit.”

With “economic interdependence,” as Davutoglu likes to call it, the linchpin of Turkey’s new foreign policy, diplomatic overtures have gone hand in hand with new commercial links. A growing business elite of “Anatolian tigers” have developed an appetite for new markets. From 2002 to 2009, the share of total exports to neighbors and Black Sea countries has leapt from 11 to 19.8 percent. The share of imports from the region has grown from

15.5 to 23.3 percent. These days, Kemal Kirisci—a political scientist at Bogaziçi University—suggests that the success of a Turkish ambassador “is often judged on the basis of the increase of Turkish exports to the country during his term of tenure.”

SOFT POWER

Turkey’s soft power, propelled by the rapid growth of trade volume, might produce its greatest success yet—in a part of the world that Turkish strategists are accustomed to seeing as the country’s biggest security threat. Since the end of the first Gulf War and the extension of the American no-fly zone over northern Iraq, Turkey’s greatest fear has been that an independent Kurdish state should emerge across from its southern border, and

that such a state—prosperous, oil-rich and relatively secure—should become a magnet for Turkey's Kurdish population. This fear grew after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Turkey refused to back, and which left the Turks—formerly free to launch attacks against PKK bases in Iraq—on the outside looking in.

Over the past couple of years, relations between Turkey and northern Iraq have vastly improved. Cross-border trade has blossomed, with 80 percent of all goods sold in Iraqi Kurdistan said to originate in Turkey. High level political contacts have also been on the rise, as Kurdistan Regional Government leaders exchange official visits with their counterparts in Ankara. Turkey has even opened a consulate in Iraqi Kurdistan's capital, which would have been tantamount to treason just a few years ago. Soli Ozel, a Turkish commentator, says the Iraqi Kurds are hedging their bets ahead of the American withdrawal from Iraq. After the Americans leave, as Ozel puts it, "the Kurds fear that the Arabs will, metaphorically speaking, eat them alive."

For all its accomplishments, serious doubts remain as to whether Turkey's "trading state" foreign policy leaves any room for values like human rights and promotion of democracy, especially when it comes to the Middle East. When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the widely disputed June 2009 presidential elections in Iran, the Turkish president and prime minister were among the first foreign leaders to congratulate him over the phone. Over the next few days, as the Iranian authorities sent riot police to beat and shoot at protesters on the streets of Tehran, the Turkish Foreign Ministry buried its head in the sand. The only statement Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu eventually mustered was that "the election disputes" were "an internal matter of Iran."

Explains the AKP's Kiniklioglu, "We're certainly not going to promote human rights and democracy the way the American neocons have. If the aim is to produce results, we find it more effective to speak face to face. We prefer to talk to them behind closed doors rather than criticizing them through media outlets." Asked whether Turkish diplomats actually raise human rights issues with their interlocutors in countries like Syria or Iran, Kiniklioglu answers in the affirmative. "To be honest," he immediately qualifies, "it's not at the top of our agenda."

AND THEN THERE'S ISRAEL

Whatever its stated preference for speaking freely behind closed doors, the Turkish government has had few qualms about criticizing one of its previously most dependable allies, Israel, in full view of the cameras. During a January 2009 panel discussion in Davos, held on the heels of Israel's bloody bombing campaign in Gaza, Prime Minister Erdogan publicly quarreled with Israeli president Shimon Peres, accusing him of "knowing very well how to kill people." Three months later he called Israel "the main threat to regional peace."

It's fair to say that many Americans sympathized with the Turks after the May 31 attack on the freighter *MV Mavi Marmara*, that was headed for Gaza—a special forces-style action that left nine dead and many more wounded. The Turks' initial outrage over what their foreign minister described as Israeli "piracy" seemed well justified. Erdogan's subsequent refusal to classify Hamas as a terrorist organization, however, made western observers uncomfortable. His statement, reported by major news outlets, that "the world now perceives the Star of David alongside the swastika," further eroded global sympathy.

Turkey's stance towards Israel has made it that much more difficult for Erdogan's government to defend itself against charges of hypocrisy and double standards. Quick to label Israeli military operations in Gaza a "crime against humanity," Erdogan has shied away from using similar language to describe the much more widespread atrocities taking place in Darfur. The situation in Darfur, as far as Ankara is concerned, is merely "a humanitarian tragedy," a term that seems to absolve the Sudanese authorities of responsibility for the 300,000 dead and 2.2 million displaced. Tellingly, during the Gaza campaign at the beginning of January 2009, Erdogan announced that he was refusing to take phone calls from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Less than a month later he saw no problem in hosting the Sudanese vice president, Ali Osman Taha, in Ankara.

In November 2009, Erdogan's government caused an even bigger stir when it invited Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to Istanbul for a summit. Facing intense pressure from a furious EU—Brussels was fuming that Turkey was preparing to roll out the red carpet for a leader indicted by the International Criminal Court—the Turks relented. Bashir stayed home. Immediately, Erdogan dug himself into another hole. "I have been to Darfur as prime minister," he remarked during a press conference, "and I did not detect [any] genocide there." In any case, he added, "no Muslim could perpetrate such a thing."

Despite Davutoglu's protestations to the contrary—he has repeatedly distanced himself from those who label his poli-

cies "neo-Ottoman," aware that the term would not appeal to the Empire's former subjects—there is no denying that the AKP government retains a large soft spot for its Muslim and Arab allies. This is, to a large extent, a product of the new political elite's cultural background. Unlike their predecessors in government, AKP leaders, most of them religious conservatives from the Anatolian heartland, feel far more comfortable in Damascus or Tehran than they do in Brussels or Washington.

As Kiniklioglu recently wrote, "The Europeans still have a hard time making the mental shift concerning Turkey...

They do not seem to have fully accepted that Turkey has changed and that Turkey's re-entry into the Middle East is permanent." Permanent—and welcome. Thanks in no small part to its highly publicized spats with Israel, Turkey's image across the entire Arab Middle East has been improving dramatically.

According to a November 2009 poll, 75 percent of those surveyed in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Territories hold a "very positive" or "positive" view of Turkey. Some 79 percent believe Turkey has the influence to bring peace to the Arab world. The Turks themselves appear keener than ever to reciprocate the goodwill. According to a Transatlantic Trends survey released in September this year, 20 percent of Turks agree that Turkey should act in closest cooperation on international matters with countries of the Middle East, double the number in 2009. Thirteen percent argue that Turkey should cooperate with the EU; a mere six percent choose the United States.

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By suggesting that Turkey is “turning from the West,” the current debate—dressed as it is in Cold War terminology—fails to do justice to the breadth and depth of the nation’s foreign policy revolution. Regardless of what the AKP’s critics might argue, Turkey has not parted ways with the West simply by rediscovering the East. Although the EU negotiating process has slowed to a crawl, Turkey remains committed to the objective of EU accession. Although it has improved relations with Muslim countries, including Iran and Syria, it has also reached out to non-Muslim nations such as Armenia and Russia. And although it has clashed with the United States on the Iranian issue, Turkey provides military support in Afghanistan and remains a member of NATO and an invaluable intermediary between Syria and Iraq.

A COLD WAR TURN

If anything, therefore, the last few years in Turkish foreign policy tell a story that is more nuanced than the one coming out of Washington—namely, that the myth of Turkey as a “bridge” between East and West has finally outlived its usefulness. Instead of deferring to American or European interests in the Middle East, Turkey has begun to promote its own agenda. Where this coincides with western ones, fine. Where it does not, too bad.

The Turkish government should not be surprised that its foreign policy is losing it valuable friends in Europe and America. By associating with Holocaust deniers and indicted war criminals, the Turkish leadership has already damaged the moral high ground it claims on a range of international issues. By deploying rhetoric that fans the flames of anti-Semitism, it has alienated a large segment of the western political class. No mainstream European politician

will find it comfortable to stand behind a country whose leader compares the Star of David to the swastika, just as none will find it easy to support a country which accuses Israel of state terror but refuses to apply the terrorist label to Hamas. And no one will come to the defense of a government that breaks with its allies on an issue that America and the EU perceive as one of the greatest threats to international security—the Iranian nuclear program. For a number of people, Turkey’s refusal to support a new set of sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council may have been the last straw. “The moment the EU has more in common with China and Russia than with the Turkish candidate in one of the most important foreign policy questions is also decisive for the enlargement project,” wrote Jörg Lau, an influential pro-Turkey author, for the German weekly *Die Zeit*.

For years, the Turkish government has been telling the EU that it cannot hope to have a credible policy in the Middle East without Turkey on board. It is right. Turkey has all the tools necessary to guarantee the EU a greater presence in the region—a European goal since the foundation of its Common Foreign and Security Policy. As Finland’s foreign minister recently remarked, Turkey is arguably “more influential in the world than any of our member states together or separately.” Still, the Erdogan government’s post-Gaza rhetoric and its “no” vote on Iranian sanctions put forth by the UN Security Council has given many Europeans pause. Turkey might have one hell of a dynamic foreign policy—but is it compatible with Europe’s? If words like Lau’s are anything to go by, Ankara is facing a public relations calamity. Turkey’s foreign policy used to rank among its greatest assets in the EU accession process. Lately, it is in danger of being perceived as its greatest liability. ●