
Turkey And The Middle East : An Updated Assessment

By Prof. Barry Rubin
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Turkish interests and perceptions

In a sense, no country has tried harder to get out of the Middle East than Turkey--by way of achieving membership in the European Union--yet Turkey does have an important role to play in the region. At the same time, though, this situation is complicated by divergences over Turkey's identity, interests, and internal politics.

Turkey is still very much the product of the remarkable reforms launched by Kemal Ataturk in the 1920s. He sought a Western-oriented, secular, modernizing state which avoided foreign adventures or territorial claims. The Turkey he sought was one united around Turkish peoplehood, a unitary and highly centralized state.

While some of Ataturk's legacy is very much under challenge today, Turks cannot for one moment forget the impact of his policies. In addition, even when the country is diverging from Ataturk's vision, these developments are often the result of the relative success of the system he established.

For example, Turkey's relative stability and economic development, following the liberalizing economic reforms of the 1970s and 1980s, raised up a new middle class in central Anatolia which was more religious and traditional-minded. Then, too, the role of the army as the ultimate protector of the republic was a creation of Ataturk which has frequently acted as an insurance policy against the failure of electoral politics.

From the late 1940s into the 1990s, Turkey's strategic priorities were fairly consistent. Seeing the primary threat as emanating from the USSR and Soviet bloc, Turkey emphasized its alliance with the West (symbolized by its NATO membership) and especially with the United States. It was thus opposed to radical Arab regimes which were allied with Moscow.

The other key aspect of Turkish policy was the conflict with Greece over the Aegean Sea borders, Cyprus, and other issues. Since both countries were part of the Western alliance, however, this friction was usually restrained.

With the Cold War's end in the 1990s, however, Turkish leaders were very much aware that they needed to find a new orientation. The Soviet Union and its bloc disappeared, removing the threat from the north. Instead, ethnically Turkish states emerged with which Turkey could have good relations. But Turks also knew they had to figure out how to reconfigure their alliance with the West in a situation where Turkey might be considered less of an asset.

The earlier part of this process involved the virtual end of the conflict with Greece. There was also an important Middle Eastern component. The new threat was defined as emanating from radical neighbors like Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

While already underway, the rapprochement with Israel was also intensified by this rethinking. Both countries were non-Arab, Western-oriented democracies which had the same enemies in the region.

This approach also coincided with the Kurdish question. The radical PKK, which was carrying on a bloody terrorist war against Turkey, was a client of Syria. Turkey, too, had to be very much concerned with the internal situation

in Iraq, with its Kurdish majority in the north. Equally, Iran's support for Islamism, a threat to Turkey's secularist republic, made it seem almost as much an enemy in Ankara as it was perceived as being in Jerusalem.

The armed forces, which respected Israel's military achievements as well as seeking to buy its technological know-how, were a particularly avid advocate for the alliance. Yet there were also impressive economic factors. For Turkey, Israel was a very good market and trade between the two countries soared. A telling symbol is the resemblance between Israel's new international airport with its counterpart in Istanbul--both were built by the same Turkish company.

The Coming of the Ak Regime

With the formation of a government by the Justice and Development (widely known by the first two letters of its Turkish name, as the Ak) party in 2002, Turkey entered a new era. A key, and unanswerable, question here is whether this is a short-term change or a fundamental shift in the country's direction.

The Ak party emerged out of the frustration and rethinking by younger members in the country's traditionally radical Islamist party. Out of a blend between sincerity and pragmatic calculation, the conclusion was reached that any such group could only have an appeal if it moved toward the center and shed its more explicitly Islamist intentions.

Thus, the new party's leaders identified the Ak as a center-to-right, conservative, traditional values grouping that strongly favored EU membership. In the 2002 election, it won 34 percent of the vote and, due to the vagaries of Turkish election law, gained two-thirds of the seats in parliament. The party's reign has been deemed so successful that it raised that figure to 48 percent in the 2007 elections.

The success of the party was not due exclusively--or even largely--to its Islamist orientation. Two other key factors included the demonstrable incompetence and fragmentation of the opposition, the country's economic slump and the Ak government's success in overcoming it. Also worth mentioning is that the party appealed to Kurds, offering them a solution through common Muslim identity rather than Kurdish nationalism.

A deeper current was the long rivalry between center and periphery that has characterized Turkish society and politics. The more Westernized and modernized west of the country had dominated the Anatolian heartland, just as the centralized government bureaucracy ran roughshod over the private sector. With the development and growing wealth of the interior, plus massive immigration to cities, the Ak represented a challenge to the old order.

And once the Ak proved that it was not being run by wild-eyed Islamists, a growing respect for the party became fashionable even in highly secular and Westernized circles.

How should one assess the Ak? It cannot be put either into an Islamist or a moderate box. Both elements are present. There are many elements in the party, including the current president, Abdullah Gul, which would like to see an Islamist Turkey. There are others, probably including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who seem sincere about following a more centrist path. An additional element, however, is the long-term effect of the Ak regime in moving Turkey in an Islamist direction. How long the party will be in power is going to be a critical factor here.

The Effect on Turkish Foreign Policy

This domestic upheaval had less effect on Turkish foreign policy than one might have expected. Of critical importance is the fact that the new leadership very much wanted to prove that it was not extremist. Thus, the party was very avid on striving for EU membership. This was popular with its important constituency among newly rising manufacturers, who saw membership as being in their personal interest. In addition, many of the reforms pressed for by the EU, notably those weakening the power of the army and statist bureaucracy, were also welcomed by the Ak.

Relations with Israel were also relatively insulated. For one thing, the army wanted them to continue on a warm level, and letting this happen was a relatively cheap way to avoid friction with the military and use as proof that the Ak was not an Islamist party, not to mention the trade benefits. There is tremendous hostility toward Israel in the Ak regime, stoked further by a harshly anti-Israel media, but the policymakers follow their interests, not their preferences.

More change, however, happened regarding Turkey's relations with other Middle Eastern countries and the United States, though some of this was due to developments in the region. After Turkey successfully intimidated Syria away from supporting the PKK, relations with Damascus eased considerably. Once Saddam Hussein was overthrown, Iraq was no longer a threat in the same way. The mutual Islamic/Islamist orientation between Turkey and Iran also brought them together.

With the United States, relations underwent a serious crisis. The background of this was the Islamic orientation of the Ak government and its 180-degree turnaround regarding attitude toward Middle Eastern radical movements and states. But the foreground was the Iraq issue.

Not everything was preordained. Turkey did come close to supporting the offensive against Saddam Hussein in 2003. But nationalist, Islamic, and anti-American factors came together ultimately to escalate hostility toward Washington. Specifically, Turkey felt threatened by the relative anarchy in Iraq coupled with the rise of Kurdish power there. The old fear of a Kurdish state across the border undermining southeastern Turkey's ethnic Kurdish population is a major strategic and psychological factor in Turkey. The fact that the U.S.

presence did not crack down enough on the PKK presence in northern Iraq was a special irritant.

The United States has been restrained in its treatment of Turkey and the Ak government, so much so as to draw complaints from the opposition and even claims that Washington wants the Ak in power. Tensions have eased of late.

Still, it should be a matter of concern that Turkey's current rulers feel more comfortable with Iran than the United States.

Turkey and Middle East Diplomacy

While Turkey can play a constructive role in the region, one myth should be put to rest. Turkey is not, in any meaningful way, a model for Arabic-speaking countries. For historical, nationalistic, and other reasons, Arabs do not look to Turkey. This was true for the Ataturk system and it is equally so for the "moderate Muslim" regime of the present.

As a state and regional power, however, Turkey can be helpful. This aspect was symbolized in November 2007 when Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas addressed the Turkish parliament. The duo also signed an agreement with Turkey for two industrial zones in the West Bank.

Turkey wants to play a part on Arab-Israeli peacemaking for several reasons.

One of them is prestige and showing the value of good relations with Turkey; another is to burnish the Ak's moderate credentials. The idea that more stability in the region is good for Turkey, along with strong sympathies for the Palestinians, are additional factors pushing in this direction.

Yet there are also limits to what can be accomplished. Turkey's regime does not want to go so far as to antagonize its new friends, Syria and Iran. And the Ak party's Palestinian sympathies run as much or more to Hamas than to the forces of Abbas. In terms of providing a channel for secret communications, an assistor of economic development, and a peace supporter to balance the rejectionists in the Arab world, however, Turkey has some real value.

An indirect advantage of a Turkish role is to strengthen Europe-Turkey and U.S.-Turkey links. While the Ak regime should be treated with caution, it is also important to keep it from going too far in the direction of the region's radical forces. It is better to have Turkey's government in the middle--taking some responsibility for easing the conflict; needing to maintain good relations with Israel--than for it to be cheering on Tehran, Damascus, Hizballah, and Hamas who want to sabotage any progress.

An even more complex, but in some ways even more urgent, diplomatic role for Turkey is toward Iraq. In contrast to Iraq's other neighbors, who seek solutions antipathetic to Western interests, Turkey does want a stable, moderate Iraq. Its specific demands are that there be no independent Kurdish state, that anti-Turkish terrorists are not allowed to operate in northern Iraq, and that the ethnic Turkish population there be treated fairly. These are demands that could be met.

The relative stability of northern Iraq, compared to the violent disorder in the rest of the country, has depended on Turkish cooperation, especially facilitating cross-border commerce. Turkey's role in Iraq can either be a tremendous problem or an indispensable asset depending on how it is handled.

And this is the dual bottom line of Turkey's Middle East role. It should be used to move forward a positive agenda in dealing with regional issues. And, at the same time, done so could help ensure that Turkey itself remain more moderate and oriented toward the West as is possible under its current government.
