
Turkey's New Mission

The Guatemala Times - 3/3/2009

TEL AVIV - Ever since Turkey's establishment as a republic, the country has oscillated between the Western-oriented heritage of its founder, Kemal Ataturk, and its eastern, Ottoman legacy. Never resolved, modern Turkey's deep identity complex is now shaking its strategic alliances and recasting its regional and global role. Indeed, Turkey's changing perception of itself has shaped its so-far frustrated drive to serve as a peace broker between Israel and its Arab enemies, Syria and Hamas.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's missionary zeal to replace Egypt as the essential regional mediator, and his violent tirades against Israel's behavior in Gaza, looks to many people like an attempt to recover Turkey's Ottoman-era role as the guarantor of regional peace and security. Its credentials for this role in the Middle East are by no means negligible.

Turkey is a true regional superpower, with one of the largest armies in the world. At the same time, it is the only Muslim country that, while no less worried than Israel about Iran's nuclear ambitions, can maintain excellent economic and political relations with Iran, regardless of American displeasure. Of course, Syria is Iran's ally, too, but no country in the region has the leverage with it that Turkey possesses. And Turkey's diplomatic reach in the region is also reflected in its recent signing of a friendship treaty with Saudi Arabia, while maintaining excellent relations with Pakistan and Iraq.

Europe's persistence in snubbing Turkey's attempts to join the European Union, the rise of violent anti-Western popular sentiment in the wake of the Iraq war, and strained relations with the US - owing in part to the forthcoming Armenian Genocide Act - are major factors in Turkey's change of direction. The civilizing efforts that Ataturk's revolution directed inward and in favor of disengagement from the Arab and Muslim worlds are now being revisited. The Turkey of Erdogan's dominant Justice and Development Party (AKP) appears to be seeking a new mission civilisatrice, with the Middle East and the former Soviet republics as its alternative horizons.

The uneasy challenge for Turkey is to secure its newfound regional role without betraying Ataturk's democratic legacy. Turkish democracy and secular values have been greatly enhanced by the country's dialogue with Europe and its American ties. Turkey can be a model for Middle Eastern countries if, while promoting its regional strategic and economic interests, it resists the authoritarian temptation and continues to show that Islam and democracy are fully compatible.

For Israel, the long overdue message is that its future in the Middle East does not lie in strategic alliances with the region's non-Arab powers, but in reconciling itself with the Arab world. In the 1960's, David Ben-Gurion's fatalistic pessimism about the possibility of ever reaching a peace settlement with the Arab countries led him to forge an "Alliance of the Periphery" with the non-Arab countries in the outer circle of the Middle East - Iran, Ethiopia, and Turkey (he also dreamed of having Lebanon's Maronite community as part of that alliance).

All of these countries did not have any particular dispute with Israel, and all, to varying degrees, had tense relations with their Arab neighbors. The myth of Israel's military power, resourcefulness in economic and agricultural matters, and an exaggerated perception of its unique capacity to lobby and influence American policy combined to make the Israeli connection especially attractive to these countries.

The "Alliance of the Periphery" was a creative attempt to escape the consequences of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It reflected the yearning of the Jewish state to unleash its creative energies in economic and social matters, as it created space for an independent, imaginative foreign policy that was not linked to, or conditioned by, the paralyzing constraints of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

But the security that this scheme was supposed to produce could never really be achieved; the centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict could not be attenuated. The Arabs' capacity to maintain their pressure on Israel and to keep world opinion focused on the Palestinians' plight made Israel's quest for evading the consequences of the conflict, either through periodic wars or by forging alternative regional alliances, a futile exercise.

The Islamic revolution in Iran, the changes in Ethiopia following the end of Haile Selassie's rule, the collapse of Maronite Lebanon, and Hezbollah's takeover of that country left Turkey as the last remaining member of Israel's Alliance of the Periphery. Turkey's powerful military establishment may want to maintain close relations with Israel, but the widely popular change in Turkey's foreign policy priorities, and the serious identity dilemmas facing the nation, send an unequivocal message that the alliance can no longer serve as an alternative to peace with the Arab world. From now on, it can only be complementary to such a peace.

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