

Analysis

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Summary: Last month's national election in Turkey reinforced the party system in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Prime Minister Erdoğan's decision to continue with the same foreign minister and EU minister signalled continuity leaving little reason to expect a significant change in foreign policy. However, the Turkish press and the media have recently started to imply a probable shift in Turkish foreign policy and rapprochement between Turkey and Israel. This brief elaborates on driving factors of the transformation of Turkish foreign policy. Within this framework, the author also looks at what has been happening in the Turkish-Middle Eastern relations in general and Turkish-Israeli relationship in particular and concludes that there are no clear indications of a fundamental change in the nature of Turkey-Israel relations in the near future.

New Turkish Government and Foreign Policy

by *Ersin Kalaycıoğlu*

Last month Turkey had another national election, the results of which reinforced the party system in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM), where four party groups with relatively similar seat distributions have been re-established. The governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) increased its vote share from 46.6 to 49.8 percent, yet its parliamentary seat share dropped from 62 to 59 percent due to the complexities of the country's elections laws. Nevertheless the AKP and its leader, Prime Minister R. Tayyip Erdoğan, are still in government alone. The new Council of Ministers was approved by the president on July 6, 2011. There have been several changes in Erdoğan's cabinet, but the foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, and Egemen Bağış, who has now become European Union (EU) minister, are not among them. There is little reason to expect that Turkish foreign policy will have any unexpected turns in their hands.

However, the Turkish press and the media have recently started to allude to ongoing contacts between Turkey and Israel at the United Nations (UN) and imply a probable rapprochement between the two countries. Relations between Turkey and Israel had rapidly deteriorated after the Cast Lead opera-

tion of Israel against Gaza in 2008 – 2009. A recent de-emphasis in Turkish EU relations and a similar upsurge of Turkish presence in the Middle East had created quite a stir in the international media about an axis shift in Turkish foreign policy. So, what seems to be happening?

The Clash of Like Minds

Turkish foreign policy seemed to have reached a dead end in the Turkish-EU negotiations as European public mood started to shift increasingly to the right toward embracing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim attitudes, and similarly the Turkish public shifted to the right to embrace family values, a subdued role of women at home and in public, orthodox Islamic way of life, and traditional mores of the passing agricultural society and rural folkways. Conservative and other right-wing party or coalition governments of Europe and Turkey have come to love to hate what each other represent as values, attitudes, and lifestyles. They do not stop at denigrating such cultural and political values in their election campaigns and even go so far as depicting the values of "the other" as a potential threat. Election campaigns can easily turn into who is best at coping with the Muslim threat in France or Austria



and similarly who is best at dealing with the West / Christian / Jewish threat in Turkey. Several issues — from Cyprus to Common Agricultural Policy — that could be solved if approached with an open mind, are turned into quagmires and erected as stumbling blocks halting accession negotiations. The 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath, which led to the downturn of so many economies in the euro zone, seemed also to cause many in the business community in Turkey to wonder whether there is a bright economic future in the EU for Turkey. Thus, as the negotiations with the EU are put on hold, it is only plausible for Turkey to start searching for alternative economic benefits. Turning to the oil rich region of the Middle East to look for economic opportunities seems to be a meaningful move for Turkey for the time being. Turkey has made this move with a lot of political gestures and a certain zest that seemed to have raised several queries about the Turkish motives. So, how do we explain this move?

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Middle East to the Rescue?

We have already referred to the ideological composition of the Turkish electorate and the AKP, which half of the voters supported at the polls. The AKP government and its foreign minister are conservative by their own account, with orthodox Islam and the historical and political Islamic movement at its core. The Turkish conservative majority tend to view countries with large Muslim populations as part of the *ümme* (umma – religious community) to which Turkish Muslims also belong. The claims of a common fate, declarations of a common future, or statements that we owe something to Arab communities are often instances

of public reinforcement of such religious solidarity. The government also tries to move to ease contacts with the peoples of the region, and thus abolish visas with the Middle Eastern states. One should not ignore the fact that there is also a vigorous promotion of economic relations in every political contact with those states as well. Turkey's tourism and economic relations with the Middle East have increased with leaps and bounds in recent years. However, there are also great complexities involved in those relations.

The Middle East is now in political turmoil. The cozy relations developed between the AKP government and the former Arab one-man-or-one-party governments are under stress. Iran is also following a policy of regional supremacy, which needs to be countered or contained by Turkey, putting relations with Iran in jeopardy from time to time. Those Arab countries that have developed capitalist market economies have been depending on their oil revenues (rent), which they manage well, yet they are in no position to emerge as role models or partners for Turkey, where no equivalent source of rent exists. The role played by Germany in the Turkish economy cannot be substituted for by Qatar or Abu-Dhabi. Rule of law and democracy in the Arab Middle East are not in a state that can invigorate and enhance democratic practices and the quality of rule of law in Turkey. It is also an open question of whether and how the Turkish odyssey of democratization provides any incentive for the Arab states. The only democracy in the Middle East that can serve as a major source of motivation to further democratize Turkey is Israel. However, relations with Israel have become equally messy and stressful in recent years.

Turkish-Israeli relations have been influenced by the management of right wing governments of Turkey and

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Israel. The Turkish government has been operating in an environment where anti-Semitism and xenophobia have increased in the recent years. The saga of the Palestinians is not viewed as a national Palestinian or even Arab problem but a Muslim solidarity issue among the Turkish conservative masses. Therefore, no conservative government in Turkey can take the media reports of ill treatment of Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) lightly. Gone are the days when a much less conservative political climate in Turkey viewed Arabs as the unreliable back-stabbers who sold the Ottoman armies to the British troops in World War I. The conservative majority in Turkey consider the Arabs as the *qavm-ı necib* (the elected race) who were chosen to receive Allah's message, and the Palestinians as the Arabs who are under an alien yoke of the Jewish state supported by the United States. As soon as

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the Israeli Cast Lead operation started in December 2008, as the champion of Islamism, the Felicity Party (SP) organized major gatherings to condemn Israel and the cozy relations between the AKP and Kadima governments. The AKP government immediately organized its own equally anti-Israeli gatherings to stem the rising tide of support for the SP. To do otherwise would have caused the AKP dearly in the March 2009 local elections. The Davos "One Minute" intervention of Erdoğan was as much directed at the Arab street as it was directed at the Turkish conservative voters. One should also not forget that the Palestinian issue is the easiest position for any country to exploit to distinguish itself as the leading power in the region. Iran has been using the same issue for many years. For Turkey to challenge the leading regional power position required a major criticism of Israel over the Palestinian issue.

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Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's lack of contact with the AKP government on the eve of the Cast Lead operation allowed Erdoğan to legitimately complain of being let down by Olmert's Kadima government in the shuttle diplomacy between Israel and Syria, which Turkey was facilitating. The Kadima government had some solid relationship with the AKP government, but the successor Israeli coalition government could boast with no such relationship with Turkey. The hawkish image of the Netanyahu government toward the Palestinians and the assiduous imposition of the blockade on the Gaza further reinforced the victimization of the Palestinians in the eyes of the Turkish conservative masses and their government. It was a small step for the Islamist Movement to turn the blockade into a major foreign policy issue by 2010. As the efforts at piercing the blockade on the Mediterranean began, the Islamist Movement in Turkey seemed to have grabbed the opportunity to exploit the issue to its advantage. The AKP was in no position to halt such a move. The most it could do was to show benign neglect for a flotilla in which only civilian and humanitarian aid cargo was to be hauled. The hawkish military reaction of the IDF further deteriorated the relations and created new complexities in the Turkish-Israeli relations. For the last year or so, the Turkish government has been demanding indemnities and an apology from the Israeli government, and it looks as if those demands will remain unanswered.

Conclusion: Agree to Disagree

It seems as if not much will change in Turkish foreign policy in the reign of the new AKP government. The goals of mediation, peace-making, and zero problem policy with neighbors will continue in word, while the chances are that the real politik of the Middle East will not enable Turkish foreign policy to realize either of these policies with any ease.



The Turkish–Arab relations will follow the zigs and zags of Arab politics parallel with the management or lack thereof of the increasing demands for popular participation in the political decision-making processes. Turkish–Israeli relations seem to have reached a dead-end. Turkish demands for apologies and indemnities for the Turkish citizens killed in the Mavi Marmara incident from the Israeli government seem not to be moving anywhere. The approaching date of the release of the UN Report on that incident and the probable declaration of Palestine statehood and a vote on that declaration in the UN in September 2011 point to new pressing complexities. The Turkish foreign minister has already declared that Turkey will vote to support the Palestinian right to statehood. Domestic political circumstances that the Israeli and Turkish governments operate in are also not conducive to a rapprochement as both countries. The most likely pattern in those relations to now emerge would be a freeze or rolling over of the unresolved issues into a longer term.

In conclusion, no quick fixes are available in increasingly complicated Middle Eastern and EU–Turkish relations. For the foreseeable future, more of the same pattern of the last few years of Turkish foreign relations seems to be best bet to continue towards the Middle East, on one hand, and towards the EU, on the other.

About the Author

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