

## Analysis

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**Summary:** Turkey and its Western allies have been more effective when they have acted together in dealing with the challenges across the Arab world in 2011. In Turkey's Black Sea neighborhood, where the EU takes more of a lead role than the United States, there is also an opportunity for synergy. However, this potential is limited by the state of Turkey-EU relations. Even while collaborating with the West, Turkey's leadership has continued to "otherize" the Western powers, mirroring the shortsightedness of some European politicians. Though Turkish alignment on any given case can hardly be taken for granted, Ankara ultimately does need a pillar of its regional balancing act to rest in the axis of Europe. Turkey and the EU need to have the full spectrum of maneuvering space to deal more effectively with prospective economic, political, and strategic strains looming in 2012.

## Turkey and the EU: The Limits of Unconditional Alignment

by *Diba Nigar Göksel*

As has been examined by recent GMF On Turkey briefs, Ankara and the West (particularly the administration in Washington) have recently been working in relative synch to steer the upheavals in the Arab world. In Turkey's Black Sea neighborhood, where the EU takes more of a lead role than the United States, there is also an opportunity for synergy. However, this potential is limited by the state of Turkey-EU relations, and internal dynamics on both sides that even prevent steps being taken that serve mutual interests. In recent instances, the loudest European and Turkish rhetoric has been bent on dragging each other down in the neighborhood rather than lifting each other up.

Indeed, unleashing potent accession or strategic collaboration forces between Turkey and the EU at this juncture may be unlikely, and many uncertainties in the neighborhood will keep feeding into Turkey's strategic balancing act. But this is all the more reason to foster gradual integration and seize strategically rewarding opportunities. While waiting for a better day in the EU and riding through this turbulent period of an unpredictable Moscow to Turkey's north and power shuffles to its south,

Turks and Europeans who see that their interests and values are aligned in the longer haul need to work together to prevent splinter groups from hijacking long-term win-win scenarios.

### Seeds of Re-Alignment

Ankara appears to have awoken from the dream of Turkey partnering with neighboring anti-Western regimes to gain more traction in their respective spheres of influence. Though it attracted relatively less attention, seeds of this "correction" may have first been sown in the Black Sea region where, at important junctures in the past few years, Turkey appeared to counter-balance the West rather than adding to Western leverage.<sup>1</sup> That Turkey could not (yet) count on win-win solutions in its troubled neighborhood had already become apparent in 2008 in the Caucasus, where failed initiatives starkly revealed that "zero problems with neighbors" is hardly an effective guiding principle where interests clash, one choice rules out another, and Turkey's rivals are not necessarily keen on mutually beneficial solutions. Reformers in the EU's Eastern neigh-

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<sup>1</sup> [http://edam.org.tr/eng/document/Black\\_Sea\\_Paper\\_Series1.pdf](http://edam.org.tr/eng/document/Black_Sea_Paper_Series1.pdf)



## Analysis

neighborhood still look to European instruments to assist the transition of their countries.

Shifting fault-lines in the Middle East have further consolidated the realization that maintaining zero problems with neighbors does not optimize Turkey's strategic potential, and that dealing effectively with challenges in the neighborhood can require collaboration with Western allies. It has been a sobering stretch: Turkey is vulnerable to its neighbors' whims, and the results of dealing with them alone is sketchy at best — ranging from disappointed searches for support in remedies against PKK terrorism to failed attempts to engage the Assad regime towards gradual transformation. Turkish popularity on the Arab streets is clearly not sufficient protection against concrete regional security threats, and Ankara has diverged from Moscow and Tehran on issues affecting regional power equilibriums and normative frameworks. Predictably, Turkey's Western "friends" have been more enthusiastic about Ankara's claim for more regional influence than neighboring Iran and Russia have.

Throughout 2011, the policy choices of Ankara and the European mainstream have converged on issues ranging from the Western Balkans, deterring Iran's nuclear program, steering the transition of the Arab Spring, and laying the foundations for the Southern Corridor to bypass Russia in transferring Caspian gas to Europe. But can it be concluded that Turkey is back in the fold and will use its strategic weight to enhance Western influence in the region?

### European Un-Conditionality

Turkey is bogged down in fierce debates about issues that can be considered litmus tests for Europeanization, such as historical controversies, decentralization of governance, tolerance of criticism, models for separation of power, and minority rights. Thus, it is an unfortunate time for the loss of EU leverage in Turkey.

A common perception in Ankara is that the EU tries to use Turkey for its own economic and strategic interests, stringing Turkey along with so-called conditionality and ensuring that Turkey is kept vulnerable but at the same time, through Cyprus vetoes and the like, that Ankara receives nothing meaningful in return. By now, it is clear that the EU is hardly a driver of democratization in Turkey because the accession process is not hinged on democratic criteria but has been hijacked by Cyprus and France.

Turkey-skeptics and Turkey-enthusiasts alike label and categorize Turkey's players, to conveniently fit into their own internal political contentions and ideological divides regarding Islam and culture in Europe. As a result, and ironically, the mechanism of conditionality that once was embraced by Turks of divergent convictions as an impartial process that could transcend populism and infighting now unites the Turkish political spectrum in skepticism and bitterness.

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The EU's ability to deal with Turkey as a strategic partner is even limited. Though Turkey's policies toward Syria are critical for Western strategic interests, and so far have been complementary to EU positions, the Greek Cypriot government prevented Turkish participation in the foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels that would have discussed steps in dealing with Syria.

The status of EU candidacy not only seems to mean little, but in some circumstances even detracts from potential collaboration between Turkey and the EU. While the nationals of EU's Eastern partnership neighbors currently without accession prospects are in the pipeline for visa-free travel to the Schengen area,<sup>2</sup> even implying the goal to lift

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<sup>2</sup> Europe's Border Revolution: [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)



## Analysis

visas for Turkish nationals in EU communication is met with objection.<sup>3</sup>

The nature of the current limbo strips Turkish intellectuals of their ability to tap into the EU for their progressive domestic reform efforts. An additional blow to a liberal civil society that fosters critical thinking came last month from Paris. The French lower house of parliament vote that criminalizes the labeling of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Anatolia as anything but “genocide” has stirred fury in Turkey across the board and predictably strengthened nationalist reactionism, handing Turkish politicians an incentive and justification to hike nationalistic rhetoric in return. Today, because of the widespread sense in Turkey of being under attack by a hostile French and Armenian coalition, to suggest open and critical debates questioning Turkey’s historical record or to argue that Turkey should keep trying to abide by EU prescriptions in its democratic evolution is perceived more like treachery.

### Worthy of a New Dialectic

Even while collaborating with the West, Turkey’s leadership has continued to “otherize” the Western powers, mirroring the shortsightedness of some European politicians. This past fall, when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claimed the West was only driven by oil interests in their decision to intervene in Libya and stated that German political foundations indirectly aid the PKK in Turkey, he blatantly fed into the anti-Western feeling in the Turkish public and infuriated a wide spectrum of the European political elite at the same time. Such defamation has hardly been used by Ankara against the regimes it courts or wishes to protect good relations with, even when they commit gross violations of international norms or inflict wide-scale human suffering. If opinion polls are indicative, anti-Western sentiments could very well pose a challenge to Turkey’s collaboration with Western allies down the line.

Under the current circumstances, moral self-righteousness and threats to use Turkey’s strategic advantage against the EU’s interests stirs more doubt about Turkey’s inherent European-ness and turns off Turkey’s would-be friends in the EU. While the EU struggles to find a common position through compromise among its current members,

<sup>3</sup> Conclusions of the Justice and Home Affairs Council Meeting, Statement by the Cyprus delegation, February 24-25 2011, at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/119501.pdf>

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thinking of Turkey as a member state at the same table, given Turkey’s more assertive posturing and perceived rise of nationalism, is ever harder even for well-meaning Europeans.

In recognition of this destructive dialectic, low profile measures to intensify integration and reduce the sour tone have recently been raised in Brussels. Commissioner Štefan Füle has called for a positive agenda to “inject fresh life into the mutual relations” through visa facilitation and improvements to the Customs Union, as well as “closer dialogue” on foreign and energy policies. Even European politicians principally against Turkey’s membership should be able to see the value of integration schemes that are independent from the membership track. Only concrete results can subdue Turkish cynicism at this point.

Though accession remains the overarching goal, Turkey needs in the meantime not to be left out of the European integration of the Eastern neighborhood. In late November, as a result of support from Turkey’s friends in the EU, Turkish NGOs gained observer status in the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership — despite the reluctance of Armenian and Greek participants.<sup>4</sup> The way to alleviate the concerns of Turkey’s skeptical neighbors and EU counterparts is through more engagement, not less.

Realistically, given the barriers caused by various individual member states, Ankara’s strategic coordination may need to be more bilateral in nature, working with like-minded EU member states, rather than with the Union as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=neither-neighbor-nor-member-bringing-turkish-civil-society-into-the-fold-2011-11-27>



## Analysis

The EU is consumed by salvaging its economic viability, and the European External Action Service (EEAS) is not likely to deliver effective and unified EU foreign policy for some years to come. Meanwhile, of course, power struggles within and between countries in the Eurasian and Middle Eastern neighborhood will keep churning, without waiting for the EU to recuperate.

Rather than rearticulating its foreign policy with commitment to Western alignment, Ankara will likely keep striving for “strategic autonomy.”<sup>5</sup> Though Turkish alignment on any given case can hardly be taken for granted, Ankara ultimately does need a pillar of its regional balancing act to rest in the axis of Europe.

### Conclusion

As its strategic collaboration value for the West reaches a peak, Ankara seems intent on hammering home the message to counterparts that excluding and offending the Turkish government has consequences. The possibility that anti-Western tendencies of Turkish public opinion are fostered by Ankara to raise the stakes in Western capitals of “loosing Turkey” is a concern.

Another prevailing question is whether or not Washington will turn a blind eye to the democratic deficits of the Turkish government for the sake of smooth strategic collaboration in the neighborhood, much like it did in the 1990s. The EU may be the only external reference that can be expected to prioritize the quality of democracy in Turkey. Despite their disillusionment, critical intellectuals should think twice before boarding the bandwagon to discredit the EU in domestic debates.

On one hand, Turkey is in a confrontation mode with Israel, Cyprus, Armenia, and Syria, and on the other hand, Moscow and Tehran have renewed apprehension about Turkey’s apparent strategic re-alignment with the West. Meanwhile, Arab nationalists and Islamist groups in the Middle East have reservations about Turkey’s prospective regional dominance. Though Ankara may feel confident enough today to confront diverse counterparts, its moral, political, and strategic bases are not without vulnerabilities. Limiting the spread of adversaries would be strategically expedient at this juncture.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.gmfus.org/publications/publication\\_view?publication.id=2015](http://www.gmfus.org/publications/publication_view?publication.id=2015)

Turkey and the EU need to have the full spectrum of maneuvering space to collaborate and to deal more effectively with prospective economic, political, and strategic strains looming in 2012. This requires EU member states and Turkey not to provoke confrontational discourse against each other. Though individual politicians may see that their interest lies elsewhere, ultimately Turkey *is* European by virtue of benefiting from the resolution of conflicts, open economies, seamless borders, good governance, and the evolution of democratic culture in its larger neighborhood.

### About the Author

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