

Analysis

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Summary: Is Turkey parting ways with its traditional allies? Is it trying to reconstitute former territories of the Ottoman Empire as a Turkish zone of influence? Observers of Turkey's foreign and domestic policies are at a loss to interpret and predict the behavior of the Turkish government because of what appears to be erratic rhetoric and actions of the government itself. The Turkish government has found it difficult to make adjustments in its foreign policy in the face of unfavorable developments. It is trying to figure out what to do in cooperating with the international community while preserving its own interests and policy preferences. In the meantime, it has so far failed to appreciate the amount of damage its attempt to serve contradictory ends has done to its reputation as a reliable ally and a partner in the Atlantic alliance.

Turkey Hesitates to Revise External Priorities

by *Ilter Turan*

Introduction

Is Turkey parting ways with its traditional allies? Is it trying to reconstitute former territories of the Ottoman Empire as a Turkish zone of influence? These and other similar questions are being frequently asked. Observers of Turkey's foreign and domestic policies are at a loss to interpret and predict the behavior of the Turkish government because of what appears to be erratic rhetoric and actions of the government itself. It is possible for one official to make two or more contradictory statements in the same day, and several officials may utter widely divergent remarks on the same policy question. Is this intended to confuse the outsiders as regards the government's true intentions, are there contradictory and irreconcilable differences within it, or, is it possible that there is no agreed upon policy and officials make remarks depending on the occasion and the context? To try to answer these questions, let us begin by identifying the three major sources of uncertainty in Turkish politics: one external, the other two internal.

The Erosion of Regional Leadership

Turkey, hoping that its role as a regional leader would be enhanced as

a result of the Arab Spring that catapulted Islamic movements to power in Tunisia and Egypt, welcomed such political change. In contrast to pre-2009 policies through which Turkey had managed to stand equidistant from all countries in the region and play the role of the honest broker, the upheaval prematurely named "spring" presented an opportunity to the Erdoğan government to adopt a new policy line, that of the leader of a bloc of countries with Sunni majority populations. Turkey's leaders judged that the days of the Nusayri-dominated Syrian regime were limited, and extended support to the mainly Sunni moderate Syrian opposition.¹

The Turkish aspiration to lead a Sunni Bloc was stimulated in large part by the strengthening of Shia power in the region under Iranian leadership. The 2003 U.S. invasion had brought a Shia government into power in Iraq. The government of Nouri al Maliki was exclusionary, failing to allow for meaningful Sunni participation in politics. For this reason, Maliki's relations with Turkey grew progressively worse over time while his relations with Iran grew better, fanning Turkish concerns that a Shia bloc was evolving. In this context,

¹ Nusayri is a heterodox Shia sect.

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the kind of government Syria has (or who rules Syria) is critical. The continuation of Bashar al Assad in power would lead to the formation of a Shia crescent extending to the Mediterranean. This crescent would not only stand in the way of Turkey's dreams of regional leadership but also cut Turkey off from Sunni Arab countries to the south. Therefore Assad and his Baathist regime had to be brought down. Turkey intensified efforts to affect political change.

Turkey's leaders had judged that the Syrian regime was weak and the opposition to it was strong. It turned out that the support base of Assad included other religious minorities as well as the more secular Sunni segments of Syrian society. In the international domain, Iran and Russia displayed an unswerving commitment to the Syrian regime, a stance that was not matched by the Western powers that supported "democratic" change. As it became apparent that displacing Assad was difficult and the moderate Syrian opposition was ineffective, Turkey began to extend support to a variety of groups whose virtue was sometimes no more than opposing the Syrian leader. These appear to have included some that pursued "questionable" goals and employed "questionable" tactics.

As Turkey's visions for Syria went unfulfilled, the Muslim Brotherhood government under Mohammed Morsi was toppled by a military coup in Egypt. The government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had invested much hope that Egypt would develop in a direction to its liking and had been generous with economic support. Its reaction to the coup was more than just negative. The Turkish government was insulting in its pronouncements, pulled back its ambassador, and behaved as if it were a party to Egypt's domestic politics. The result has been highly strained relations that have not yet improved.

Turkey's pro-Muslim Brotherhood orientation undermined its relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, except Qatar. While the reasons for Qatar's policy choice remain unclear, Saudi Arabia has been concerned that the winds of change in other parts of the Middle East would lead to pressures for liberalization in the conservative monarchy and its neighbors, something the Saudis fear would unleash uncontrolled forces and produce unpredictable outcomes. Therefore, Riyadh has chosen to be supportive of the new

Egyptian regime, dissociating itself from any policies that the Turkish government might pursue.

While Turkey's foreign policy built on leading a regional Sunni Bloc has failed, the government, rather than adapting to this reality, has insisted on its anti-Egypt and anti-Assad policies. This has left Turkey isolated in a region that it had hoped to lead. But it is not clear that these aspirations for leadership would have been fulfilled even if developments had gone the way Turkey's leaders had desired. The religious bonds that Turkish leaders find to be critically important are modified by feelings of Arab nationalism, as well as sub-nationalisms such as Egyptian and Syrian, standing in the way of their submitting to Turkey's leadership. Furthermore, not only do these societies have claims to regional leadership themselves, but many among the leadership cadres view the Ottoman rule that Turkish leaders perceive as forming a common bond with them as an experience in colonialism.

Turkey's continuing aspiration to bring about change in Syria by accommodating different groups that have little in common except for their opposition to the Assad regime, its engaging in permanent hostility to the current regime in Egypt, and its departure from its allies and friends in the pursuit of a regional policy while not possessing sufficient means to shape developments in the region has frustrated the Turkish government. This has led it to blame others for subverting Turkey's growing regional influence, thereby introducing a strong element of uncertainty into Turkey's external relations.

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Managing Ethnic Diversity

Two internal sources of uncertainty confound those emanating from foreign policy. The first of these is how to cope with the Kurdish demands for recognition of ethnic identity. After denying even the existence of Kurdish ethnicity in its persistent efforts to transform its population into an ethnically homogeneous society, successive Turkish governments during the past three decades have had to address the presence of an initially rural Kurdish terrorist movement, the PKK, that has gradually penetrated urban areas. Efforts by the government to suppress it have not succeeded. Similarly, a number of political parties attempting to represent Kurdish ethnicity have been closed by the Constitutional Court but the political movement behind them has survived. The recognition that the problem had to be addressed came slowly. Initially, without changing policy, governments volunteered that there was a problem to be addressed but they did not develop “solutions.” Then came a number of steps, perhaps few and far between, such as allowing the publication of Kurdish language books and newspapers, Kurdish language broadcasts, the opening of private cultural centers for the teaching of Kurdish, and finally even a Kurdish language channel on state television. These steps were limited to the cultural domain. They did not cover the political arena, except that Kurdish ethnic parties began to enjoy an existence reasonably free from closure by the courts.

To its credit, it was the Justice and Development (AKP) governments under Erdoğan that admitted the necessity of a comprehensive political solution. To that end, Erdoğan initiated secret contacts with agents of the PKK abroad. These were followed by visits of delegations of three parliamentarians of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) to İmralı Island where the leader of the PKK is imprisoned. The contents of these discussions, arranged through the intermediation of the parliamentarians, have not been made public. Although there have been references in the press to the development of a plan and a road map for its implementation, not enough is known about them. Some of the demands of the PKK, on the other hand, such as greater administrative autonomy for the regions with significant Kurdish populations and the conduct of teaching in Kurdish in public schools, are public knowledge.

Part of the peace plan included an end to terrorist activity and the departure of PKK irregulars for bases in Northern Iraq. This has not been fully implemented. In recent months, terrorist activity, including setting school buildings on fire, attacking projects under construction and burning machinery, and lately deadly attacks on military personnel not on duty, has escalated again. The government has blamed unnamed actors that want to subvert the process. It may also be true that there is disagreement among the diffuse groups under the umbrella of the PKK. Trying to implement the peace process through the imprisoned leader of the PKK is proving problematic, generating a sense of uncertainty in the country regarding the future and promoting erratic behavior on the part of the government.

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The De Facto Presidential System

The second internal source of uncertainty derives from the election of Erdoğan to the presidency. This was the first time that the Turkish president was popularly elected. In Turkey’s parliamentary system, the presidency is a symbolic, above-party office. But the former prime minister, citing his mandate through popular election, has continued to exercise power as if he were the head of government. This is in the nature of a *fait accompli* not detailed in the constitution. In order for the president to continue on his current path, his former party (his party ties legally ended upon his election) has to stay in power after the elections of June 2015. While the president would also like his former party to achieve a large enough majority to change the constitution to move to a presidential system, this seems unlikely.

The Problematic Nexus

The erratic rhetoric and actions of the Turkish government in both internal and external politics may be explained by



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the interplay among the three sources of uncertainty that have been discussed. For example, the Turkish government has so far refused to allow the use of İncirlik Air Base by U.S. military aircraft against Kobane unless the removal of Assad is part of the plan. This position derives from a concern that destroying the forces of the so-called Islamic State would weaken an anti-Assad force, help strengthen the Baathist regime, and strengthen the Kobane Kurdish enclave, which the Turkish government believes is attached to the Assad regime. Or, for example, the government tried hard not to appear too accommodating to the Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (BDP), particularly by allowing heavy armament shipments through Turkey to Kobane. This is because, in addition to helping Assad, it may offend the Nationalist Action Party from whose supporters the AKP hopes to attract some votes and with whom the AKP would hope to cooperate after the elections. Yet, this poorly calculated position has now been changed to allow the Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* to cross with their weapons to help the Democratic Union Party (PYD) forces in Kobane. Ironically, recently Erdoğan had referred to the PYD as a sister organization of the “terrorist PKK,” while the BDP parliamentarians were continuing their message traffic from the imprisoned “PKK” leader on İmralı Island. Other examples are not difficult to find.

The Turkish government has found it difficult to make adjustments in its foreign policy in the face of unfavorable developments. It is not necessarily trying to leave the alliance, or reconstitute the post-Ottoman space as a zone of influence. Rather, it is trying to figure out what to do in cooperating with the international community while preserving its own interests and policy preferences. So far this is going slowly and unsatisfactorily, producing a growing domestic and international feeling that Turkey needs to reconsider its priorities, order or reorder them, and maybe give some of them up. Yet, buried in its own difficulties to reconcile multifarious concerns, often driven by purely domestic political considerations and often put into difficult positions by the unrestricted commentary of the country’s president, the Turkish government has so far failed to appreciate the amount of damage its attempt to serve contradictory ends has done to its reputation as a reliable ally and a partner in the Atlantic alliance. Furthermore, its stance has undermined the element of mutual trust that needs to accompany the “Peace Process” with the Kurds

and reduced Turkey’s regional role to just another country rather than a leader.

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About the Author

İlter Turan is an emeritus professor of political science at Istanbul’s Bilgi University, where he also served as president between 1998-2001. His previous employment included professorships at Koç University (1993-1998) and Istanbul University (1964-1993), where he also served as the chair of the International Relations Department (1987-1993), and the director of the Center for the Study of the Balkans and the Middle East (1985-1993). Dr. Turan is the past president of the Turkish Political Science Association and has been a member of the Executive Committee and a vice president of the International Political Science Association (2000-2006). He is a frequent commentator on Turkish politics on TV and newspapers.

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