

Analysis

January 28, 2015

Summary: While failures in areas ranging from democratization to foreign policy have taken place in Turkey, over the same period the European Union nearly collapsed and the Middle East plunged into chaos. In this context, Turkey's shortcomings are not greater, nor more worrisome, than those of its neighbors. For Turkey, the absolute priority is to decisively address the Kurdish issue. Because of the crisis of the Middle East state system, this long-standing question again threatens the Turkish state, despite the progress made internally. Though this is mainly a domestic undertaking, the EU and the United States could play an important supporting regional role.

Time for Realism: The Need to Refocus Turkish-Western Cooperation

by *Emiliano Alessandri*

Introduction

The rocky path taken by Turkey in recent years is deeply disconcerting but has been thoroughly dissected. What have not been adequately discussed are the consequences for Western policy. The analysis has rarely started with recognition that while failures in areas ranging from democratization to foreign policy have taken place, over the same period the European Union nearly collapsed and the Middle East plunged into chaos. In this context, Turkey's shortcomings are not greater, nor more worrisome, than those of its neighbors.

As the ground has shifted for all, causing major strategic earthquakes, Turkish-Western cooperation must be recalibrated to take into account Turkey's new vulnerability as well as the less favorable regional environment. From a Western perspective, the focus should be on preventing Turkey from changing from a "bridge to the Middle East" into a transmission route of instability into Europe from both the Middle East and Eurasia. For Turkey, the absolute priority is to decisively address the Kurdish issue. Because of the crisis of the Middle East state system, this long-standing question again threatens the Turkish

state, despite the progress made internally. Though this is mainly a domestic undertaking, the EU and the United States could play an important supporting regional role.

A Troubling Path in a Regressive Environment

It is startling how predictions about Turkey have failed to materialize. A European Union member hopeful until some years ago, Turkey has lost all chances it might have had, at least for the medium term. Beside a stalled accession process, which recent achievements such as a VISA liberalization roadmap may not be enough to revive, perceptions are possibly more decisive. Turkey is increasingly looked at as a Middle Eastern, not a European, actor. This view is now frequently shared even by those who had resolutely rejected a widespread Orientalist prejudice when EU enlargement to this Muslim-majority country was first discussed. Elevated to a "model" for its neighbors, most recently after the "Arab Spring," Turkey is now chided for its own authoritarian tendencies and increasingly pervasive Islamic politics. If scholars like Samuel Huntington had cautioned against a Turkey "torn" between East and West



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earlier, the country now seems inexorably divided against itself. In addition to the religious-secular divide, other schisms have emerged pitting conservative constituencies against one another in a ruthless internecine fight. The most notable victim has been the so-called Gülen movement.

Domestic challenges are coupled with foreign policy setbacks. Ankara's dreams of a new regional hegemony, reminiscent of Ottoman grandeur, have vanished. Turkey has lost privileged access to key interlocutors, from Syria to Israel, and dissipated one of its most valuable assets: the bridge-building role it could play in the Middle East peace process, the Iranian nuclear program, and other sensitive matters. In a fast-deteriorating environment, Ankara is overwhelmed with shielding the Turkish state from the dangerous spillovers of an increasingly fragmented and violent neighborhood, whose levers it does not control and to whose sectarian rivalries it may have already succumbed. Ankara's proxy involvement in the Syrian civil war, and the politicization of its relations with Iraq and Egypt, are troubling signs of the inability to keep out of the toxic politics of the Middle East. Ankara's controversial position regarding the Islamic State group, presumably based on opportunistic calculus, is not only a dangerous gamble but another alarming sign of a "Middleasternization" of Turkey. What is more, contentious Middle Eastern policies have been matched with a no less problematic European (dis) engagement. Ankara has cynically responded to European indecisiveness (and hypocrisy) toward EU membership with disdain and growing detachment. Europe's internal crisis has weakened the pull factor further. Turkey has kept diversifying its economic options while playing with the idea of strategic differentiation as well. Dealignment from European strategy has been exemplified most recently by the decision not to participate in Western sanctions against a defiant Russia.

As a result of these turns, views of Turkey have considerably shifted. Gone are the days when its "strategic ascent" was hailed as a game changer. Past is the time when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the three-time conservative prime minister and now president, was revered as one of the greatest, not just most powerful, regional statesmen. The Turkish president is now often disparaged as the country's "new sultan," a Vladimir Putin on a smaller scale with whom it may become difficult to constructively engage.

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While there can be no denying that Turkey's situation is indeed troubling, shortcomings must be contextualized. The Turkish model declined, but at the same time, the EU ceased to be the example for the world it claimed to be. As a matter of fact, the EU experiment almost came to an end during the eurocrisis. European integration has become a highly contested proposition. For a growing number, the solution is no longer "more Europe," but "exit." While divides have re-emerged between North and South, the German continental core and the many peripheries, European democracy has been endangered by populism and resurgent nationalism. EU and national leaders have both lost public support. The democracy deficit has not, however, led to a renewed focus on democratic governance and participation. Multitudes are instead attracted to discriminatory and xenophobic politics.

In the Arab world, the disruptions of globalization and the lack of political change triggered popular movements that demanded better governance. When demands were not met, a new tide of authoritarian repression mounted. These shifts did not lead to new authoritarian stability, but instead to more formidable pressures on the Arab state system. With a few exceptions, Arab states face challenges to their own existence, not only to their governance. The weakening of borders in the Levant is one of many signs of this unfolding reality. As has been said, instead of a "ring of friends" benefiting from European influences, the South Mediterranean has turned into a "ring of fire."

Despite its position, Turkey has been able to maintain a middle course between Europe and its Arab neighbors, a not necessarily tenable yet still notable outcome. Its democratic involution has been more severe than the weakening of democracy in the EU, where with the partial exception of Hungary, setbacks have mainly affected the quality rather than the constitutive elements of democracy. Turkey's economic performance, for its part, has outcompeted



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Europe's, delivering growth well above EU average. This has spared the country major social distress. While European governments lost legitimacy as a result of ineffective responses to the crisis, the Turkish government remained comfortable because it never relinquished the levers of economic policy. While this hands-on approach has opened the door for corruption it has also allowed for a measure of wealth redistribution. Even as growth has slowed down and long-standing macro-economic imbalances have become conspicuous, feeding fears of an imminent crisis, the dynamism of the Turkish economy remains a fairly isolated case in regional perspective.

In contrast to Europe, therefore, Turkey continued to deliver on its social contract despite democratization failures and less favorable economic prospects. In contrast to the Arab world, Turkey was able to withstand the pressure of change even as illiberal tendencies prompted popular backlash. While mass demonstrations did take place during the so-called Gezi Park movement, and may yet recur, the Turkish political system has absorbed the blow for now, and the Turkish state has showed resilience compared to its Middle Eastern neighbors.

The New Agenda

When the regional context is considered, therefore, the question becomes not so much "who lost Turkey," let alone how to re-Europeanize Turkey at a time of deep EU internal crisis. The focus should rather be on how a weakened West can work with a still dynamic yet more vulnerable and less democratic Turkey in facing an increasingly testing neighborhood. Although both the EU and the United States still expect to rely on Turkey as a platform to project stability in the outer region, persuading Ankara to provide a dike against the spread of instability would go a long way in the current context.

When it comes to the European neighborhood, what is essential is that Turkey, a NATO ally, resists the temptation to provide support to Russian revisionism. Dealignment from Western sanctions is already a problem. Legitimizing new spheres of influence or joining counterbalancing initiatives would strain relations for the long term. Economic, not just security incentives, could be provided in this respect. Increasingly uncomfortable with a

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EU Customs Union it does not control, Ankara has advocated for an inclusion in some fashion in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership that Washington and Brussels would like to use to spur growth and retain global leadership. This interest should not just be positively noted, but proactively heeded. With regards to the Middle East, the most Turkey can do in the present conditions is to avoid plunging further into the quagmire. While cooperation on counterterrorism is hopefully reinforced with Western allies, defusing an explosive situation in the southeast should draw all available assets.

As the military conflict in the Levant blurs borders and reactivates fault lines, Turkey's focus should not be on the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria but the fate of its own state. The Kurdish issue has to be urgently reappreciated in all its relevance as its solution is vital to Turkey's domestic and regional future. Bold government-led efforts in recent years to establish a truce with Kurdish armed groups while a "solution process" was explored should be divorced from opportunistic calculus to become part of a strategic choice. The elements of a sustainable solution are clear to all and include the permanent end of violence, decentralization, and the full protection of Kurdish minority rights. These changes can only take place through a revision of the constitution and a redefinition of citizenship. The main topic of political debate in the run-up to the general elections in June should be how to accomplish this agenda.

Elected president by popular vote with a wide margin, Erdogan could finally shift energies from political infighting to settling the Kurdish issue in a historic way. This proof



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of statesmanship would solidify his leadership in ways that the despicable ongoing repression of internal dissent never will. The Kurdish reaction cannot be taken for granted. The Kurdistan Workers' Party's risk of losing ground or splitting if no deal is cut, however, is significant, especially after so much investment from its top leader. The outcome will be decided, therefore, not only by Kurdish politics but by the quality of the offer. The role of external actors in the process is admittedly limited, yet not negligible. Engaged in various ways in supporting Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria, Turkey's Western partners have the leverage, and above all the responsibility, to send the right messages. Realistic solutions that do not question current borders should be the only ones discussed with Kurdish military leaders, in anticipation of when the confrontation against the Islamic State group comes to an end.

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About the Author

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