

Turkey Between the West of the Elites and East of the Masses

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It is impossible to understand a state's international relations without reference to its internal makeup, and vice versa. That is why we will take a social formations approach to the question at hand: Turkey and its relations to Middle Eastern countries, most notably Israel, the Arab states and the Palestinians. Turkey's policies have been largely framed by a western-oriented elite associated with the Kemalism of the republic, but as the deeply-seated eastern, or rather Middle Eastern, sympathies of the Turkish masses came slowly to the surface, during the past quarter-century marked by the progressive opening of the political system. This has notably occurred through the electoral victories since the mid- 1990s of religiously-oriented parties, and there has been, not a real transformation, but a perceptible shift in foreign policy towards the Arab states and towards the Palestinians, with some improvement in these relations as a result, and with mounting tensions in ties with the United States occasioned notably by the invasion and occupation of Iraq. But it is impossible to speak of any real break in Turkey's traditionally pro-Western, pro-US, pro-Israeli options.

The role of denial

Traditional Turkish historiography suffers from the same problems as does the Israeli variety, in that it posits the miraculous and innocent (re-)birth of the nation in the twentieth century, and in its historic homeland. Following the transformation of Turkey from an Empire into a Republic and the abolition of the Caliphate, Mustapha Kemal Ataturk gave his famous Speech (*Nutuk*), delivered over several days in 1927 before the second congress of the Republican People's Party, thus laying the foundation for the official and still prevailing historiography of the Turkish Republic.¹ According to Ataturk and his official and academic successors, Turkey had literally been reborn from the ashes of the Ottoman collapse, as a westernizing, modernizing, essentially Jacobin nation-state. According to this narrative, the republic had come into existence fully grown and armed, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus, with no organic antecedents, and therefore lacking a past, but basing itself on the eternally existing Turkish people. The fact that both the spoken and, more fundamentally, the written language were transformed and the script changed from Arabic to Latin, meant that historical memory became excessively difficult to maintain. Classical, ethnic-national Turkish history adopted this model and takes the view that World War one signified a clean break.

According to this Turkish-nationalist historiography, those who had been living in Anatolia alongside the Turks for hundreds of years, particularly the Armenians, fled or died as a result of the First World War, and specifically, of

their own warlike activities on the side of the Russians. The treaty of Lausanne, following which there was a major population exchange with Greece, was seen as the rational solution to the allegedly impossible multinational formula. Anatolia, the 'millennial homeland' of the Turks, emerged as a supposedly ethnically homogeneous place.

In similar ways, Israeli historiography sees the Jewish people as having been miraculously restored in the promised land. The modern Hebrew language was invented, and, following the Israeli narrative, three-quarters of a million Palestinians, who had been living there until 1948 fled, with the encouragement of the Arab governments, and were not driven out by Zionist forces acting under orders. Governments and large portions of public opinions and academics in both Turkey² and Israel therefore deny the historical realities which made it possible for their ethnic/national states to come into existence: the Armenian genocide, which occurred exactly 90 years ago, and the Palestinian Nakba or expulsion, whose 56th anniversary recently passed. They also deny the implications of the continued presence of a significant minority (20% in both cases) of members of a different nation, respectively Kurds and Palestinians, who continued to live on the land to which Turks and Israelis laid exclusive claim.

Denial of their respective origins is one of the things these two states have in common, and this symbolically binds them together.³ Among the many differences between them is the fact that today, Armenians have a state of their own on part of their historic homeland, whereas the Palestinians do not. The other difference is that important sections of the Turkish intellectual and political elites are moving towards dealing with their past. Not the majority yet, and the move is accompanied, understandably, by a widely reported chauvinistic backlash. But courageous and independent Turkish academics as well as journalists, writers and even some politicians, are doing their best to reveal to their people the conditions under which the contemporary Turkish state came into being, and the heavy price paid by those ethnic groups standing in the way to the creation of an ethnically homogeneous Anatolia, Armenians mainly, but also Ottoman Greeks and Assyro-Chaldeans (not to speak of the Kurds in the more recent period). Interestingly enough, it was the rather conservative and religiously inclined government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan that proved to be the least resistant to clearing up the record. One reason for this is surely that the ideological aversion to considering Turks and Turkey in an uninterrupted historical and cultural continuum is absent among the social and political groupings on which the government is based.

Relations with the Arab states

In addition to similarities in the conditions of their creation, Turkey and Israel have common enemies: the Arabs. Turkey moved towards the West culturally, but maintained a neutralist stance before and during World War two (declaring war on Germany only in February 1945 so as to be present at the creation of the post-war system). Relations with Russia could only be problematic after the 1936 Montreux convention giving Turkey sole control over the Straits (and thus the capacity to prevent the Russian fleet from entering the Mediterranean). And the French ceding of Alexandretta to Turkey programmed difficult relations with Syria for a long time to come. True, there was agreement on some questions (as illustrated by the Saadabad treaty of 1937 with Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq). The most prominent of these was the Kurdish issue, a very frightening one for those with a sizeable Kurdish minority.

But by 1947 Turkey had abandoned its Kemalist neutrality and established an unconditional partnership with the US, as suggested, first of all, by the 1947 Truman doctrine, as embodied in Turkey's participation in the Korean war, and as formalized by accession to NATO in 1952. In the meantime, the policies of the most important Arab states resulted in their taking ever greater distance from the West, as they became enthusiastic members of what was to be called the non-aligned movement, beginning in the mid-1950s. These divergent routes taken resulted in a progressive decline in Turkish relations with the Arab states. The creation of the Baghdad pact, of which Turkey was a member, only made things worse, and the fact that this pact led to the collapse of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958, left Turkey isolated in its own region.

With Syria and Iraq there have also been long-standing disputes over water and territory.⁴ Syria supported the Kurdish nationalist/separatist movement the PKK and its leader Abdallah Ocalan, and PKK fighters also frequently found a haven in Iraqi Kurdistan. Meantime, after a honeymoon following World War two (both Turkey and Greece benefited from Truman doctrine support), Turkey's Mediterranean relations also declined steeply, notably over the Cyprus question, after the island obtained its independence from Britain in 1960. Stung by its isolation, Turkey undertook to mend some fences with the Arab world, from the late 1960s on. By 1967, it enjoyed some Arab support (notably by Saudi Arabia) on the question of Cypriot inter-community strife. And after 1970, commercial exchanges with the Arab world increased somewhat. True, most Turkish imports were and remain oil-related, and therefore its principal partners are Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Libya, a problematic type of trade indeed, dependent on oil prices and political stability for its maintenance.

Israel for its part has been at war with Syria and Iraq since 1948, and this has given it and Turkey a commonality in foreign policy, in terms of containing these Eastern Arab powers.⁵ Turkey also needed Israeli support in its rivalry with

Greece over the eastern Aegean, including Cyprus, in addition to a variety of rocky protrusions and the vital continental shelf issue. And Israel came to need Turkey badly after the collapse of the Shah's regime in Iran in 1979 and the advent of the Islamic republic. It was happy to extend assistance to Turkey against militant Armenian activities on the part of the ASALA most notably, and also against the PKK. Turkey obliged for example, by not taking a strong position regarding Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982.⁶ This was not an evident stance for Israel, which normally supported all non-Arab ethnic groups in the Mashreq, including the Kurds of Iraq, in keeping with the historical goal, announced by David Ben-Gurion before even the creation of the Jewish state, of laboring to divide the Middle East into a series of ethnic-religious nations grouped in mini-states or confederations, peopled by Maronites, Kurds, Druze and so on. Indeed, the utopia, at one point considered a real prospect, of Arab unity was actively resisted by both Turkey and Israel, both of whom saw it as an existential threat. Israel helped to find financing for Turkey's giant dams on the Euphrates, and actively promoted Kurdish separatism in Iraq, with disastrous consequences for the Kurds and the Iraqi regime, since Saddam had first attempted to deal with the Kurds as a nation within Iraq. He failed, of course, because of his own centralizing, autocratic and repressive propensities, but also because of Kurdish irredentism, actively promoted by such outside powers as Israel and the United States of America. Meantime, Israel opposed Kurdish separatism in Turkey. Under the American umbrella, the Israelis played a key role in helping Turkish forces capture Ocalan in Kenya in 1999.

The watershed of 2003

Turkey's refusal to let US troops cross its borders on their way into Iraq in March 2003 resulted in serious damage to bilateral relations, and it is difficult to see how things can ever get back to 'normal', as defined by Turkish acquiescence in all aspects of American policy in the Middle East and Central Asia. This "earthquake" in the international political field came just four months after the domestic political earthquake represented by the landslide victory of Justice and Development party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan.⁷ The former earthquake explains the latter, and both cannot be properly understood without a necessary shift in perspective on Turkish history and social relations.

The US hastened to take revenge. It did not encourage the PKK to renew the five-year cease-fire signed in 1999 with Turkey.⁸ The latter roams freely in Iraqi Kurdistan, and stages cross-border attacks, causing casualties in the ranks of the Turkish military, not to speak of the habitual retaliation by the Turkish military against Kurdish civilians.⁹ In the meantime, there has been a reversal in relations with Syria over the Kurdish issue that began in the year 2000, and the two states now cooperate closely in this regard. Turkish president Sezar having visited Syria in 2000, he invited Bashar Al-Assad on a state visit in 2004, over US objections. Secretary of defense Rumsfeld continued to complain about the visit in 2005. It would appear that Israel, acting as a US proxy, was actually training

Kurdish peshmergas in northern Iraq during the period in question.¹⁰ Still worse, in the eyes of the US, Prime Minister Erdogan visited Damascus in December 2004, and then continued to reject US pressure to isolate Syria after the Hariri assassination in Beirut. Just how firmly the pressure was being rejected could be seen in the fact that the Turkish president once again visited Damascus in April 2005. This Syrian-Turkish axis has limited goals, as it is intended to send a message to the US with regard to Iraqi policy and the Kurdish question, but it stands as a precedent and has serious regional implications.

Relations with Israel and the Palestinians

Where the Palestinians are concerned, it is quite different. Turkey has been at least as supportive (or, one might say, not more unsupportive) of Palestinian claims to self-determination, particularly since 1967, as have the so-called frontline Arab states.¹¹ It is easy enough to find the reasons for this: Palestine is weak, it is under occupation, it is a popular issue among the Turkish public, the cost of supporting it is limited. The same goes for the Arab states. But since Turkey is closer to Israel.¹² and also to the United States, its counsels perhaps carry more weight than do the impotent protestations of Egypt, not to speak of Syria or Jordan. At any rate, it has not influenced Turkish-Israeli relations in any perceptible manner, since the Israelis are interested in actions and are oblivious to mere words.¹³ This was even true when the Turkish government was protesting Israeli war crimes in the early months of the second intifada. In 2005 The Turkish prime minister delivered to the Palestinian Authority large numbers of documents relating to land questions during the Ottoman period.¹⁴ and this could not have pleased the Israelis very much, since it strengthened the Palestinians' hands in their putative negotiations for a final settlement. But this did not bother Israeli officials much either, for they are in a position of strength where land, and all other questions relating to the Palestinians, are concerned.

Much more significant are Turkish-Israeli military relations; these are very strong, particularly since the mid-1990s, and unlikely to be diluted in the foreseeable future. They were first forged during the time of the cold war when they had a common foe much more powerful than the Arab ones mentioned: the Soviet Union, but they entered full bloom well after the end of the cold war, in the mid-1990s.¹⁵ The United States, protector of both Israel and Turkey, was the key link in their relationship. And interestingly enough, relations between Turkey and the US have more recently been seriously hurt, even as Turkish-Israeli military (but not civilian) relations have continued to improve. If one can speak of a mini cold war, at present, between Turkey and the United States because Turkey refused to participate in the invasion of Iraq, it occurred in response to overwhelming pressure from public opinion, which was very much in harmony with its government. The reality on the ground is that Iraq has been partitioned, and one of the reasons it is not partitioned *de jure*, is because for Turkey, it would be a *casus belli*. Furthermore, the Kurds don't want a state, as long as they can have their militias (whether or not they are formally integrated into the Iraqi army), impose their own taxes, and get a good portion of the

region's oil. Turkey is not at ease with its current contradictory international relations, it would like to change them. But a return to the unconditionality of former Turkish-US relations would sit very badly with the public.

Towards a new historiography of contemporary Turkey

The most remarkable aspect of this veritable earthquake in Turkey's international politics, and in particular its relations with the United States, is that nobody expected it, least of all the "Turkish specialists" in the Washington think-tanks. People everywhere thought that for historical and strategic reasons, Turkey would never consider being seen to adopt the 'hostile', and certainly very contrapuntal position of the Russians, the Chinese, the Germans and, most of all, the French (who for the American establishment were seen as the leaders of this "axis of weasels"). Why such a radical misjudgment could have occurred can only be understood because of the generalized acceptance of the dominant Kemalist version of Turkish history and culture, based on the idea of the 'clean break', and steeped in American-inspired modernization theory.

In order better to understand contemporary policies of Turkey in the region, and to hope to anticipate future developments, one must therefore take a longer view. Here I would adopt the periodization proposed by Fatma Müge Göcek.¹⁶ She refutes the ethnic-national vision whereby Turkey was reborn in 1923, and proposes a very different breakdown emphasizing the unbroken flow of history, thus rendering contemporary Turkish politics much more intelligible. For Göcek, what she calls the "new post-nationalist Turkish historiography" is moving away from the classical doctrine of Atatürk's *Nutuk*. Rather than such a stark and artificial break (in which, coincidentally, the Turks, and among them, the secular elites, are given pride of place and most importantly, of agency), Göcek proposes the following: 1. the Formative Period, 1453-1639 (it being speculated that the establishment, consolidation, expansion and institutionalization of a multinational empire crystallized with the capture of Constantinople, although Ottoman roots go back at least to the end of the 13th century); 2. the Institutionalization Period, 1639-1834; 3. the Reform Period, 1834-1902; 4. the Nationalist Period, 1902-1982 (beginning with the Paris Congress of Ottoman Opposition Parties); and 4. towards a Post-Nationalist Period, 1982-2005. In this new periodization, there is not a unitary Turkish ethnic group at the outset, but an indigenous multinational reformist movement including Turks and all the other *millet*s or nationalities, which grew organically out of the multinational empire established progressively after 1453 by the Ottomans. There is an unbroken continuity between the twentieth century Ottoman empire and the Turkish republic (a continuity which the successor states to analogous multinational empires, such as the Russian, the Austrian or the German all recognized from the start), but the latter has been ethnically purified, cleansed, even as Turkish identity was radically redefined.¹⁷

The directly relevant period where contemporary history and politics are concerned is the post-nationalist phase beginning in the 1980s. This is when the neo-liberalization of the Turkish economy and communications began, and public space thus progressively expanded, outside of state control. And it is here that social groups, both at the elite and the popular level, began to discuss their own vision of the future of their society. The sporadic repression of these movements by the military may, paradoxically, have actually encouraged the growth of that space, since discussions were steered away from 'political' subjects and concentrated on broader issues of identity. This resulted in the progressive reinsertion of the Turkish social formation into its Middle Eastern and Islamic environment, along with the re-appropriation of historical roots.

Turkey's rediscovery of the Middle East

In this latest period, during which national myths have been progressively broken down, the role of public opinion, the desires of the broad masses of the Turkish people have slowly come ebbing to the top and in the end influenced or even made policy, something which the traditional elites and the military can do little about, as they found out not long after they had toppled the government of Necmettin Erbakan, judged too Islamically oriented and too pro-Arab,¹⁸ in 1997. As we have seen, it took only five years after that for the Erdogan's AKP to gain a landslide victory. This government cannot be replaced by a coup d'etat, things having gone much too far for that (only in part because of commitments made to the EU, which are themselves, on the Turkish side, an outcropping of more than a half-century of massive migration to north-west Europe, and the domestic social impact thereof), but only if it loses an election. The trend is therefore irreversible, it is deeply and structurally implanted into Turkish society, and the rapprochement with the states and peoples of the Middle East will not be stopped simply by finding a formula pleasing to the US administration and the Turkish leadership regarding Iraq. Interestingly enough in regard to the present argument, Erdogan's government is far more inclined to accept the idea of a federal Iraq (and perhaps, by implication, a federal Turkey) than any of its predecessors,¹⁹ something which historically the Turks have known for centuries, the Jacobin republic having been of recent Kemalist vintage as we have seen.

Nonetheless, Turkey has been, is and will continue to be involved in a strategic triad with Israel and the United States, even as the key European states continue to have closer relations with the Arabs. If Turkey can draw closer to Europe, it could conceivably modify or even reverse its alliances and join the Arab-European axis,²⁰ This depends on a variety of factors. One is whether European leaders are able to resist the pressure of their own traditional, chauvinistic and ethnocentric social elements and move forward in membership negotiations with Turkey. But it depends even more on whether Turkey can come to grips with its past, come clean on the Armenian genocide, and find a real *modus vivendi* with Greece and Cyprus, in addition to rediscovering the existing but, previously, deeply interred commonality of interests and cultures with its various neighbors.

¹ For the reinterpretation of Turkish historiography which lies at the core of the present article, I am indebted to Professor Fatma Müge Göcek of the University of Michigan, notably to her unpublished paper entitled "Defining the Parameters of a Post-Nationalist Turkish Historiography through the case of the Anatolian Armenians," presented at the Turkish-Armenian seminar, Salzburg, Austria, 15 April 2005.

² Philippe Videlier, "En Turquie, le déni et l'œuvrage," *Le Monde*, 23 April 2005.

³ The commonality and reciprocity of memory construction is clearly mirrored in dominant Israeli attitudes towards the Armenian genocide, which closely mirror Turkey's. Cf. Yair Auron, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000) and, by the same author, *The Banality of Denial: Israel and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

⁴ Bfilent Aras and Hasan Koni, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Revisited," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 24 (4), 2002: 47-60.

⁵ Alain Gresh, "Turkish-Israeli-Syrian Relations and their Impact on the Middle East," *Middle East Journal*, 52 (2), 1998: 188-203.

⁶ And regarding Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, which Turkey refused to condemn at the UN: cf. Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Palestinian Question in Turkish Foreign Policy from the 1950s to the 1990s," *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 25, 1993: 91-110 (102).

⁷ George E. Gruen, "Turkey's 'Political Earthquake': Significance for the United States and the Region," *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 25, 2003: 87-97.

⁸ Saini Moubayed, "Turkish Honeymoon," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 21-27 April 2005: 8. ⁹ Gareth Jenkins, "Adding Fuel to the Fire," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 21-27 April 2005:7.

¹⁰ Moubayed, citing Seymour Hersch writing in *The New Yorker*, June 2004.

¹¹ For details regarding the ups and downs of Turkish relations with the Palestinians, and more specifically, the PLO, see Mahmut Bali Aykan, *op.cit.*

¹² Cf. M. Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish-Israeli Relations Through the Lens of the Turkish Identity Debate," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 27 (1), 1997: 22-37.

¹³ George E. Gruen, "Turkey's Regional Role in the Aftermath of September 11, 2001," *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 24, 2002: 3-29 (18-19).

¹⁴ Arnon Regular and AlufBenn, "Turkey Transfers to Palestinians Historic Land Documents," *Ha'aretz* 3 May, 2005.

¹⁵ There is a vast literature on the dramatic development of military ties between Israel and Turkey, closely followed, for example, by Jane's Defence Weekly from 1994 on.

¹⁶ Göcek, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ The continuity between the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey is also stressed by a leading contemporary Ottoman historian, the major link being found in the drive for 'westernization', a process conflated with the quest for 'civilization'. Francois Georgeon, "L'Empire ottoman et

l'Europe au XXe siecle: de la question d'Orient it la question d'Occident," *Confluences Mediterranee* 52, 2004-2005: 29-39.

¹⁸ Philip Robins, "Turkish Foreign Policy under Erbakan," *Survival*, 39 (2), 1997: 82- 100.

¹⁹ "Erdogan's Travels," *The Economist*, 375 (8425), 7 May, 2005.

²⁰ Didier Billion, "L'integration de la Turquie: de nouvelles responsabilites internationales pour l'UE," : *Confluences Mediterranee* 52, 2004-2005: 143-164 (155).