

# The New Face of Turkish Foreign Policy

Friday 24 December 2010, by [HEYDARIAN Richard Javad](#) (Date first published: 22 December 2010).

## Contents

- [Blunders of the Cold War Era](#)
- [The Rise of AKP](#)
- [Turkey's Foreign Policy \(...\)](#)

Today's Turkey bears little resemblance to its former self. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkey was a staunch U.S. ally, unconditionally committed to join the European community, fiercely secularist, authoritarian and repressive, economically troubled, aloof to its regional Arab neighbors, and occasionally extremely antagonist towards Islamist political movements. The 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed the rise of a rejuvenated, assertive, and increasingly prosperous, 'new' Turkey. A glance at today's Turkey reveals a plethora of positive developments. On the political front, the domestic make-up is more democratic, participatory, and reflective of deeply-embedded Islamic traditions. On the economic front, Turkey has enjoyed unprecedented levels of economic growth, technological development, and international trade. It is currently among the leading tier-2 emerging economies, and the 15<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world. These developments at home have served as the platform for launching a new foreign policy doctrine, which is markedly different from the orthodoxy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkish foreign policy. The new foreign policy doctrine mirrors growing stability at home, and projects Turkey's expanding ambitions abroad. To understand Turkey's somehow 'progressive turn' in the realm of foreign affairs, one should first analyze the underlying transformations, which set the stage for Ankara's foreign policy innovations. A confluence of significant changes in the domestic as well as international level explains Turkey's new face in global affairs.

## Blunders of the Cold War Era

Post-War Turkey was built on the legacy of Kemal Ataturk's ideology, which emphasized the establishment of a modern, secular, and 'European' Turkish society. In terms of domestic politics, the greatest legacy of the Kemalist tradition was the embedding of the principle of laïcité into the fabric of Turkish society. However, unlike France, democracy was constantly sidestepped due to decades of Cold War 'priorities' as well as pernicious military and right-wing nationalists' political interference in the name of 'preserving the secular character of the state'. Such 'secular fundamentalism' went as far as launching four coups the elected governments in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997 - supplanting them with secular dictatorships. The Turkish 'deep state', composed of fierce secular nationalists from the elite military and civilian cadres, - or commonly known as the 'Ergenekon' - is also believed to have encouraged judicial coups against 'Islamist' parties that have represented huge democratic mandate (Although, the Turkish deep state predates the Ergenekon issue).

In the realm of economic development, Turkey's period of relatively 'high' economic growth from 1950-73 was concurrent with Europe's "Golden Age" of post-war reconstruction. But, over time, gross mismanagement of the economy and Cold War-dictated overemphasis on military buildup,

overly burdened the national budget, which compromised the initial post-war industrialization strategy of Turkey. The Import-Substitution Industrialization strategy ISI began to crumble in 1976 as current deficits and creeping double-digit inflation - followed by a foreign exchange crisis in 1977-80 - became unmanageable. This precipitated huge public unrest and a serious political crisis.

Subsequently, inspired by the "Chilean Model" of liberalization under the auspices of Pinochet's military dictatorship, the Turkish Armed Forces seized political power through the 1980 coup. The purpose was to create a stable political environment for the efficient and sustained technocratic implementation of a neo-liberal policy package. This was consolidated through a 1982 constitutional revision, which transformed the formerly 'social' state of Turkey into a 'regulatory' one. The ultimate aim was to transform Turkey into a modern export-oriented market economy. Meanwhile, labor unions were emasculated, and the emphasis shifted away from agriculture and rural development towards production destined for foreign markets.

After a brief boom period in exports - mainly based on the productive capacities from the previous decade of ISI - consistent negative per capita growth and major distributional shocks, ahead of the 1989 elections, exposed the flawed foundation of the 1980-88 new economic paradigm. To remedy the situation, the Turkish state pushed the envelope and initiated aggressive financial and capital account liberalization. The result was similar to other developing countries. Turkey was exposed to the risks of 'hot money inflow', or short-term portfolio investments, and this proved to create more instability and fluctuations in times of crisis and panic-driven capital outflow, similar to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Not only was democracy compromised, but also economic stability. Turkey was to suffer then succeeding rounds of economic crisis, devastating fluctuations, boom and busts, and shortening business cycles. In 1991, 1994 1998-99 and 2001, Turkey experienced downturns, while enjoying short-time booms in 1990, 1992-3, 1995-7 and 2000. By 2001, as a result of the economic crisis, Turkey was reduced to ashes and it called upon the IMF to provide a new round of rescue package.

## **The Rise of AKP**

Beset by constant political uncertainty and economic debacles, the very legitimacy of 'Turkish laïcité' came under question. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) decisively won the 2002 and 2007 elections, but it did not dare to openly challenge the fundamental principles of Atatürk's secularist edifice. AKP's later attempts at reforms would come in a carefully polished and discreet manner. The Turks yearned for change and lamented the downward spiral of stagnation and repression brought about by decades of secular autocracy. The fact that EU showed little reticence in its contempt for the prospects of Turkey's membership in the Union did not help to dent the rising nationalism among the Turkish people, especially the expanding middle class. The AKP had little reservations with tapping into this new, young, proud and increasingly nationalist-Islamist constituency. Over the succeeding years, AKP further consolidated its political base and tried to open the political space for the flourishing of religious self-expression and Islamic values. Yet, the laic powers were able to frustrate many of AKP's efforts in allowing greater religious expression; this was evident in AKP's inability to institute a lasting legal reform on the sensitive issue of headscarves ban in schools and universities. But, AKP's attempts to lift the headscarves ban and introduce certain Islamic-inspired regulations - such as disallowing the public display of revealing or semi-naked billboards and images and pushing for alcohol ban in certain places - signaled a change in the dynamics of Turkish politics. The effect has been the introduction of a relatively more pluralistic politics, wherein both religious individuals and westernized sections of the society co-exist - not without tension - in an ever-changing social landscape.

AKP's success has undoubtedly lent credibility and clout to its agenda. In less than a decade, AKP transformed Turkey into a major-emerging economy with more than three-fold increase in the size of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Turkey is now a member of the elite Group of 20 (G-20) club as well as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It has also joined the ranks of High Human Development countries in the Human Development Index. Among the Middle class, economic prosperity gradually mixed with an appreciation for the Ottoman Islamic roots of Turkey. The country found a new sense of pride and prestige. The old elite, the ancient regime, is finding it increasingly difficult to convince millions of middle class Turks that religion is an anti-thesis to modernization and development. Western materialism and positivist-secularism of the previous decades gave in to euphoria of nationalism, inward introspection, and a deep yearning for re-discovering that proud and majestic Turk embedded in the glorious Ottoman history.

While more women, including the wives of AKP elites, choose to wear hijab, Islamic-inspired hotels, restaurants and resorts are beginning to dominate the Turkish landscape as well as its world-renowned tourist spots. The most interesting aspect of Turkey's "Islamization" is its rising and rapidly expanding merchant-capitalist middle class, which has no qualms with combining Islamic values with wealth-creation. Just like the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Calvinist merchants, this bold emerging Middle class is the backbone of a burgeoning society. Among this 'Anatolian Tigers', Islamic piety is co-existing in perfect harmony with 21<sup>st</sup> century international business and trade.

The Intellectuals are also playing a central role in the transformation of the discursive context, which is shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century Turkey. The spiritual guides of the new Muslim middle class are men like Fethullah Gulen - among the world's most influential Intellectuals - who boldly accentuate the centrality of Islamic values in the life and business of a citizen. As living standards improved, calls for democracy as well as freedom of expression and religion are gained momentum. A growing number of intellectuals, students, citizens and politicians are demanding a more democratic Turkey.

Historically, the secularist judiciary has been the site of clashes between more religiously inspired parties, on one hand, and secular-nationalists, on the other. After narrowly escaping a constitutional ban in 2008, AKP has struck back and is cracking down on its rightwing opponents. Since 2008, in what is dubbed as 'Ergenekon trial', the Turkish public has seen an unprecedented showdown between the military and the elected government. In the last 2 years, more than 200 hearings have been made vis-à-vis the exposed coup plots designed by groups composed of retired generals, serving officers, academics and hard-line secularists. The 'grand battle' is currently confined to the halls of the courts, but no one can say how long the balance of power will continue to tip in favor of the AKP and its agenda. But there are signs that AKP continues to hold the higher ground. In August, AKP scored an impressive political victory against secular ultra-nationalists by winning a referendum, which allows the AKP to introduce sweeping reforms across many organs of the state, especially the judiciary - in an effort to 'civilianize' Turkey's politics. This would undoubtedly tip the balance of power in favor of AKP.

The government has also exhibited a more 'enlightened' approach to macro-economic planning, and trade-related policy-making. In the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis, ironically, it was the government's fiscal decisiveness, counter-cyclical measures and relatively less interdependence with western financial markets, which contributed to steady recovery and considerable resilience in face of huge external shocks. On March 13, 2009, the Turkish government announced a comprehensive economic stimulus package, which amounted to \$3.2 billion. The introduction of new regulations was targeted at lowering the private consumption tax rates (OTV) on the automotive sector and the removal of the OTV completely on home appliances. The government also contemplated on financial support for small and medium enterprise, and a possible further subsidization of farmers and measures to decrease production costs in the manufacturing sector. The package also foresaw

measures to boost exports by allocating an additional 500 million liras (\$296 million) to Eximbank, a state-owned bank geared to supporting exporters. The IMF had little to criticize against Turkish government's ala Keynesian 'demand-side' focused and stimulus-led recovery, since the global financial crisis seriously undermined the legitimacy of the neo-liberal agenda. In addition, Turkey's lurch to the East and expanding economic ties with other developing countries significantly helped Turkey to maintain production rates and even expand it in certain sectors. In recent years, Turkey has had consistent double-digit growth vis-à-vis exports to other developing countries, especially those within region. Somehow, enhancing of south-south ties is gradually becoming a key pillar of Turkey's foreign trade policy - partly explaining Turkey's improving relations with developing states.

## **Turkey's Foreign Policy Makeover**

The political landscape in the Middle East is steadily changing as Nationalism - with Islamist inflection - is beginning to grip many of the US' allies. The humanitarian, physical and psycho-emotional devastation brought about by the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has considerably diminished the US' appeal among many Muslim countries, with the citizens of Turkey and Egypt being among the most critical of their government's relations with the west. In the 2008 Gallup Poll, 72%, 72% of Egyptians and 67% of Turks had disapproved of the US' role as a global leader. Despite Obama's breath of fresh air, the region is yet to see any shift in America's actual foreign policy, hence skepticism if not cynicism vis-à-vis the US is here to stay.

Looking at the bigger picture, recent years have witnessed a significant shift in the Middle Eastern affairs. Regional powers have stepped in to resolve conflicts and diffuse growing tensions in different corners of the Middle East. This took place as the United States gradually lost both its leverage and political will to address protracted crises in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, and security concerns in the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan. With this shift away from the United States as the dominant power broker, it's natural for regional powers such as Turkey to extend their reach and step-up to fill in the power vacuum. Turkey, together with Iran, is beginning to assert itself as the powerhouse of the Islamic world and defender of the rights of Muslims internationally. Its diplomatic stature has dramatically improved as it enmeshed itself in the resolution of international security issues such as Iran's nuclear program, war on Gaza, Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the Syrian-Israeli conflict.

Interestingly in Turkey, relations with the west are taking a new direction, which is in direct contrast to its traditional unquestioning support for the NATO, and Israel. Great minds such as Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu - also religiously pious - are shaping Turkey's new foreign policy approach. Under this newly crafted foreign policy doctrine, dubbed by outsiders as 'neo-Ottomanism', Turkey is transforming into a more assertive and independent power in the Middle East that is exploring its interest in the east and re-evaluating the basic merit of its relations with Israel and the West. Turkey has deepened its politico-economic ties with energy-rich countries such as Russia and Iran while its relations with Israel have immensely deteriorated, mainly due to the Israeli war in Gaza and its policies vis-à-vis the occupied territories. Last May's massacre of Turkish nationals, by Israeli naval forces - in international waters - marked the beginning of a steep decline in bilateral relations. Turkey's approach to its membership in the European Union is also changing.

One of the most profound aspects of recent developments in the region has been the growing intimacy between Turkey and Iran. As a member of the United Nations Security Council, Turkey has continuously called for diplomatic resolution on Iran's nuclear program, and vehemently opposed any military action against Iran. Trade and bilateral investments are booming, and gradually Iran - in an effort to battle isolation - is entering Turkey's financial sectors. Turkey has dramatically altered

its approach towards Iran: it has removed Iran from the list of countries/actors that it considers as a threat to its national security; together with Brazil, it opposed the recent United Nations' resolution against Iran; it also, together with Brazil, brokered a nuclear agreement with Iran; it opposed NATO's plan to build a missile defense shield against Iran; and, it has been selected as the host for Iran's subsequent negotiations with P5+1 (U.S., France, Britain, China, Russia, and Germany). As a sign of its growing diplomatic significance, Iran and the P5+1 have agreed to pursue talks in Turkey in January 2011. Turkey is now an indispensable player in resolving one of the most serious international security issues - the Iranian nuclear program.

**Javad Heydarian**

---

**P.S.**

\* Source: Focus on the Global South. Date of publication: Wed, 2010-12-22.

\* Javad Heydarian is an Iranian Political Scientist specializing on Middle Eastern Affairs.