

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY—THE RISKS OF OPPORTUNISM

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Frank G. Weber in his classic 1979 study The Evasive Neutral: Germany, Britain and the Quest for a Turkish Alliance in the Second War documented Turkey's diplomatic maneuvering between the Axis and the Allies. Turkey ended up on the "winning side" having flirted with and assisted Germany until the war turned against the Axis. Since then, pragmatism, opportunism and reliance on the country's geographic position enabled Turkey to hold the West hostage. Every time Turkey either violated international law, international agreements, or the interests of the Western alliance, it relied on guilt trip explanations of its behavior. These explanations usually run along the lines of "had the West and/or the US been more sensitive to Turkey's needs, its conduct would have been different."

Most of Turkey's apologists have conveniently forgotten Ankara's post-1939 opportunistic policies. This "mea culpa" approach by American and European analysts reached a climax on the eve of the election of the Obama administration at a time when Turkey was seriously reevaluating its ties with the US and the EU. American and European think tank publications, often sponsored and/or funded by Turkish foundations and other Turkish sources, rationalized Turkey's shifting policies towards Russia, the Middle East and Iran. They attributed these trends to the failure of the EU to unconditionally admit Turkey in its ranks. They also blamed the US for its lukewarm endorsement of Turkey's EU aspirations, as if the US had a voice on matters of EU enlargement. The same critics saw the Cyprus problem as an artificial obstacle to Turkey's European vocation. Thus, a "disillusioned" Turkey had to look for "new" horizons in its foreign policy.

Recent developments in and around Turkey tell a different story. This is a story of diplomatic opportunism that has its roots in that country's policies since WWII. This opportunism will create new long term problems in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean unless the EU and the US respond now to

Turkey's arrogant policies. Instead, Turkey's American and European supporters are promoting Turkey's "Islamic/democratic" model as a model for the emerging post-Arab Spring Middle East. Is this the model the US and the EU would like the "new" Middle East to emulate? Let us take a look. Turkey:

Has the highest number of journalists in jail among countries classified as democracies.

Continues to occupy 37% of the Republic of Cyprus in violation of unanimous Security Council resolutions and international law.

Has been found guilty of gross and continuing violations of the European Convention on Human Rights by international courts and international organizations.

Denies the existence of the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus.

Has failed to implement much of the human rights legislation adopted under EU pressure.

Nine years ago, Prime Minister Erdogan rose to national prominence as a reformer. He also had the support of Turkey's western oriented business elite. He successfully built on the economic reforms first introduced by Turgut Ozal to promote Turkey's European vocation. However, the laudable objective of EU accession served other hidden AKP policy objectives. Democratization and freedom of religion were used by Erdogan to keep the military in their barracks and to consolidate Islam in an otherwise "secular" country. Through a combination of astute conspiratorial actions Erdogan temporarily neutralized the leadership of the Turkish armed forces. In view of Turkey's troubled civil-military relations, curbing the power of the military was a positive development. This, however, has given Erdogan unchallenged power in domestic and foreign policy matters. Since the 2011 Parliamentary elections and the constitutional amendments adopted few months earlier, Erdogan is free to consolidate Islam and his own autocratic power. Supported by a strong policy team that includes Ahmet Davutoglu, the regime's foreign policy theoretician, Turkey has embarked on a campaign to define itself as the new regional influential country. Erdogan's and Davutoglu's "neo-Ottomanism" is now presented along Islamic lines for two reasons, the negative history of

Ottoman rule in the Middle East and the Islamic revival in an alienated Middle East. To strengthen their new approach to the region, Turkey's leaders rely on:

their country's strategic location;

their cultural affinity to the region;

policies backed by domestic political consensus;

policies backed by a strong economy;

the political vacuum in the Middle East at a time of American and European economic problems; failed Western policies in the region; the uncertain direction of the Arab Spring; Iran's isolation and the absence of any countervailing Arab leadership.

Turkey's "zero problem" policy toward its neighbors.

However, a closer examination shows the risks lurking behind Turkey's leadership role. These include:

The fact that the "zero problem" policy will work only if Turkey's neighbors submit to Turkey's demands and political objectives. Turkey's problems with Greece and Cyprus provide the classic examples.

Turkey's openings to Syria and Iran required Turkey to placate the US by agreeing to host part of the radar system in the US anti-missile defense system. What we do not know at this time is the price paid by the US for a security policy designed to counter threats from Turkey's newly found ally, Iran.

Claiming the role of Islamic leader Turkey ended its twenty year long alliance with Israel, an alliance that brought many political and economic benefits to Turkey. However, pushing Israel to its limits will backfire. Israeli leaders, regardless of party affiliation, do not forgive and do not forget treasonous behavior.

Turkey's regional superpower ambitions carry nuclear risks. Erdogan has revived Turkey's failed Akuyu nuclear project, this time with Russian assistance. This allegedly peaceful nuclear energy project will be built in a seismic region of Turkey, despite Japan's recent experience. The project is

fraught with additional dangers for three reasons: Turkey's agreement with Brazil to safeguard Iranian nuclear materials; the many years of covert nuclear cooperation with Pakistan; and Turkey's ambition to become a regional superpower. The Pakistani connection is particularly troubling given the long political and security association of the two countries. During the western nuclear embargo on Pakistan, Turkey was the conduit for the covert transfer of nuclear technology to that country. Pakistan is also the country that extended nuclear assistance to rogue states like Iran and North Korea. Turkey's early response to the Arab Spring is one more example of its opportunism. For years, Erdogan had a love fest with Middle East dictators including Assad, Mubarak and Gadhafi. Few months before the Libyan revolt, Erdogan was honored to receive the Gadhafi Prize! In the early days of the Arab Spring, Turkey opposed any UN sanctions on Libya or NATO's involvement in Libya's liberation. With an appropriate memory lapse, Erdogan visited Libya and Egypt with the assistance of the Muslim Brotherhood. He was received in Cairo as an Islamic hero. That visit was particularly troubling coming as it did two days after the burning of the Israeli Embassy.

Other contradictions in Turkey's policies include its demands for EU accession despite its documented violations of the terms of the 2005 agreement that initiated its accession talks with the EU. Turkey has also challenged the legal right of the Republic of Cyprus to explore and exploit natural resources in its EEZ. Turkey has not ratified any of the three treaties on the law of the sea that are part of EU law. Instead, this candidate country for EU accession has threatened the use of force to stop the exploration and exploitation of natural resources in the EEZ of the Republic of Cyprus, a country member of the EU. In another ironic and dangerous action Turkey and the unrecognized regime it has established in occupied Cyprus signed an agreement to delimit the continental shelf between occupied Cyprus and Turkey so that the latter can start exploring for gas and oil in Cypriot sovereign territory! In doing so, Turkey appears to have forgotten its own arguments used against both Greece and Cyprus that

islands do not have a continental shelf or an EEZ .Turkey's arrogance of power became clear in the aftermath of Erdogan's 2011 electoral victory, Turkey's actions against Israel, Cyprus and its new role as an Islamic leader. Israel appears to be the only country that had the courage to tell Turkey what to do with its opportunistic policies.. The response by the EU and the US has been lukewarm, as expected, in order not to offend Turkey's sensitivities. This low key response carries the risk that it may be misinterpreted in Ankara. So far, no one else than Israel had the courage to deflate Erdogan's balloon. Opportunism has been the hallmark of Turkish diplomacy since WWII. Those catering to it are likely to harvest the fruits of Turkish arrogance.