

## **WHICH WAY IS TURKEY GOING?\***

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There are different views on this issue and a great deal of wishful thinking. According to the latest report from the International Crisis Group Turkey's new engagement in the Middle East has been subject to misconceptions, but we are reassured that Turkey generally allies itself to EU member states' foreign policy positions "with values and goals that are generally favourable to its Western partners".

Nevertheless, Turkey's policy of "economic interdependence" with Iran and its subsequent vote against further sanctions in the UN Security Council have brought it into direct conflict with its Western allies. At the G20 summit in Toronto in June President Obama is reported to have warned Turkish premier Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that unless Turkey shifted its position on Israel and Iran it stood little chance of obtaining US weapons. And last month Secretary of State Hillary Clinton convened a special meeting of the State Department and the National Security Council to reevaluate US policy towards Turkey.

Even British PM David Cameron, in the panegyric he delivered in Ankara on his visit in July, reminded his host that despite the nuclear fuel swap deal concluded between Iran, Turkey and Brazil, Iran would still retain around 50% of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium.

Trade is clearly a driving force behind Turkey's rapprochement with Iran, and at a recent Turkish-Iranian trade forum in Istanbul Erdoğan set as a target a tripling of bilateral trade from the present \$10 billion, 80 percent of which comes from the sale of Iranian natural gas. A Turkish member of the executive board of the Turkey-Iran business group saw it as a big opportunity that Turkey could take over the finance and trade that was carried out by Dubai and the United Arab Emirates before sanctions were applied, and the Turkish prime minister saw Turkey as Iran's door opening to Europe.

This has in fact been confirmed by a Reuters special report, which states that Turkey's blossoming financial-economic relationship with Iran provides Iran with a gateway to the entire European financial system. "The fact that Turkey is allowing itself to be used as a conduit for Iranian activity via Turkish banks and the Turkish lira is making it possible for Iranian funds in Turkish guise to make their way into Europe."

Prime Minister Erdoğan has called Iran's nuclear programme "peaceful and humanitarian", but President Abdullah Gül has admitted in an interview with Forbes Magazine: "I do believe it is their final aspiration to have a nuclear

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weapon in the end." However, when it comes to Israel, Turkey's policy of "soft" diplomacy has met its limitations.

Erdoğan's tirade against Shimon Peres during a panel discussion on Gaza at the World Economic Forum in January last year was designed for domestic consumption and the forthcoming local elections in March. The government's support for the aid flotilla to Gaza backfired, with awkward questions being asked about Erdoğan's own role, but his popular support was intact. The prime minister's latent anti-Semitism has been given full rein and Turkey-Israel relations have suffered as a result.

### **Drifting east**

In contrast to the International Crisis Group's report the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Trends for 2010 concludes that double the number of Turks interviewed compared with 2009 said that Turkey should act in closest cooperation with the countries of the Middle East in international matters. There was also a decline in those who said Turkey should cooperate with the EU and a marked drop in support for Turkish EU membership from 73% in 2004 to 38% this year. Furthermore, a majority still agreed that Turkey has such different values that it is not part of the West.

This drift to the East has been accompanied by much gnashing of teeth and self-recrimination on the part of the West. For example, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates blamed Europe "because [Turkey] was pushed, and it was pushed by some in Europe refusing to give Turkey the kind of organic link to the west that Turkey sought". And Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini stated "we Europeans have made a mistake in pushing Turkey eastwards instead of bringing them towards us".

But this foreign policy realignment, which reflects the domestic changes that have taken place since the AKP government came to power in 2002, should come as no surprise. Prime Minister Erdoğan is not a European in thought, word or deed, and is still a '*Kasımpaşalı kabadayı*' (a bully from the tough neighbourhood in Istanbul where he grew up), which he reflects in his rhetoric and political instincts. And a broad base of the Turkish people love him for it.

British foreign minister William Hague has allied himself with his Finnish colleague Alexander Stubb in advocating Turkish membership of the EU, and Stefan Füle was beside himself with enthusiasm when he told the SEECF (South East European Cooperation Process) conference in Istanbul in June: "Turkey has been making remarkable advances in reforms".

In Ankara David Cameron argued "it is just wrong to say that Turkey can guard the camp but not be allowed to sit in the tent". But as Christopher Caldwell, senior editor at The Weekly Standard, countered in the Financial Times: "This is a *non sequitur*: a country can contract a military alliance without forging a political union."

The International Crisis Group in its report mentions "the undoubted benefits of a partnership" and the EU continues to emphasize Turkey's strategic importance. According to the Transatlantic Trends survey a plurality of Turks believed that joining the EU would be a good thing for the Turkish economy, but here they ignore the benefits that Turkey already enjoys through the customs union. Given the fact that the European economy is on the ropes and many EU states are struggling to absorb large-scale immigration, to entertain the prospect of Turkish membership would be catastrophic and utopian. On his visit David Cameron concluded a "strategic partnership" with Turkey, whatever that might imply. Couldn't we just leave it at that?