

Turkey's New Middle East Role

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Since assuming power in 2002, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) has succeeded in making Turkey the most important strategic player in the Middle East. The heirs to the Sunni Ottoman Empire no longer seem to be interested in joining the European Union, in obeying old American rules of conduct in the Eastern Mediterranean, or giving Israel a free ride as it runs roughshod over international norms. Indeed, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has found enough strength and fortitude to strike out on his own in an area Turkey wanted to shun in the twentieth century for the hope of belonging elsewhere. But while finally concluding a full-circle journey back into the Middle East, Turkey has been able to muster the political will, economic strength, and popular support necessary for a leading role that makes Ankara an address for seekers of interests in the strategic region.

At least four important developments have helped Turkey's assumption of this coveted position, none of which are directly linked to Europe's no-less-than-racist attitude about Muslims ascending to its club, although this has a role in the country's decision to turn eastward. First, there is a gaping hole in the Middle East that calls for an acceptable regional actor to complement the overarching American role in the area. The Arab world is inexcusably absent from

helping to shape the future of its region despite the high political and economic stakes involved. Israel is isolated for historical reasons and by default, and will never be accepted as a leading actor despite its military superiority. Iran is the Shi'ite 'beast in the east' that has done its best to alienate the moderate Sunni regimes of the area, has supported movements rebelling against the Arab status quo, and continually threatens to set the area on fire. Such an environment is a natural ground for a strong regional actor that, on the one hand, has the ambition to lead and, on the other, can bear the political and economic costs of leadership; thus Turkey's foray into the breach.

Second, Israel's uncompromising attitude regarding peace in the Middle East, and not only under the rightwing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, forced Turkey to finally take a stand on what a majority of Turks consider to be a grievous situation. While Ankara preached patience to the Palestinians and worked to broker a deal between Israel and Syria, successive Israeli governments played for time, reneged on agreements, and asked for more concessions. The accommodating Turks could no longer swallow Israeli intransigence and actions after Israeli forces invaded the Gaza Strip in December 2008, killed over 1,400 innocent civilians, and destroyed the infrastructure in a failed pursuit of Islamist HAMAS. Turkish public criticism surfaced at the Davos Conference in Switzerland, to be followed by anger over Israeli humiliation of the Turkish

ambassador, by cancellation of joint military exercises, and by a general deterioration of the historic relationship. The Israeli commando operation against the Turkish-led flotilla of ships carrying food, medicine, and building supplies to Gaza and that killed Turkish human rights activists was what finally broke the Turks' proverbial back.

Third, the international community's ongoing dispute with the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding its nuclear program presented Turkey with a golden opportunity to be the only regional interlocutor between the P5+1 and the Shi'ite state in the Arabian Gulf. Turkey stands to gain as a potential repository of all hoped-for solutions to the ongoing nuclear dilemma, the inherent irony of the situation notwithstanding – a regional rival using another's troubles to enhance its own stature. Turkey's partner in the uranium swap deal is only far-off Brazil, an aspirant for leadership in Latin America, not the Middle East. If Ankara can hold on to the swap deal despite UN Security Council Resolution 1929, an admittedly difficult but not impossible task since Iran has not yet completely reneged on the deal, Turkey can emerge as host to the exchange, as the world's go-to mediator, and as in partial control of Iranian moves. Wily or not, Iran's negotiators would then have to abide by Turkish rules of international behavior or face worse circumstances.

Fourth, there seems to be a general American acquiescence of a larger-than-usual Turkish role in the Eastern Mediterranean which, at any rate, cannot be

separated from events and potential developments in the entire Middle East. Turkey over the last two years was able to sign strategic and other agreements with Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan and has the backing and friendship of the Arabian Gulf states and Egypt. With the reality of American troubles in Iraq and Afghanistan, of potential catastrophes in Pakistan and Yemen, and of an uncompromising Israeli government, Washington may finally be close to allowing a local power to assume a leading role that could stop the wagon of Middle East troubles from completely veering off the cliff.

But while real, and because of the dialectical nature of regional and international politics, Turkey's regional ascendance is not without costs and potential risks and pitfalls. Domestically, and for a variety of reasons, the AKP may not be able to muster the electoral mandate it now enjoys or the popular support for its regional policies. Regionally, the Arab world may not fully cooperate with a leading Turkish role and thus deprive Ankara's policies of legitimacy and support. Israel may never change its uncompromising positions and thus refuse renewed Turkish mediation in the peace process, at least on the Syrian track. Iran may simply choose to finally go for broke and withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and thus negate Turkey's interlocutor role. Internationally, the United States may still object to a totally independent regional power having influence over such a strategic and important

region. But for the time being, Turkey seems to have assured itself a leading role that can only increase its prestige and influence in the Middle East and beyond.

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Erdogan image:

http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2004/issue2/graphics/contents/i2_a2b.jpg

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