

## Turkey's New Role in the Geostrategic Landscape of Euro-Muslim Relations

**While Turkey increases its economic weight and prominence in energy affairs and solidifies its geostrategic interdependence with Europe, the latter approaches Ankara with a dangerous mistrust, expressed through a new security architecture that seeks to marginalize Turkey's influence.**

*Dorukhan Aras and Andrea Bonzanni*

Europe's collective imagination about Muslim peoples, rooted in the crusades and centuries of strife, has been built on a foundation of perceived confrontation. More recently, the tragedy of 9/11 and the troubled integration of Muslim immigrants within Europe has renewed this dichotomous mind-set, framing the 'long-bearded Muslim next door' as the *new enemy* to replace the 'ruthless Russian communist' of the Cold War era.

Nonetheless, a closer look at the last decade of Euro-Muslim relations reveals that cooperation was more common than confrontation. This trend has unfortunately been eclipsed by more negative attention-grabbing events, driven by the sensationalist tendencies of the mass media. While the War on Terror may cast a long shadow over the past decade, the great deal of positive interaction that took place between several Muslim countries and Europe should not be forgotten or ignored.

For instance, the young Republic of Azerbaijan, a majority Shiite Muslim country, has developed solid ties with Europe and the US. It did not fall into the orbit of neighboring Iran, nor has it nurtured a significant home-grown Islamist movement. Similarly, the long-standing alliance between Saudi Arabia and the West has only been marginally weakened by the glaring ideological incompatibility of their respective religious and socio-political creeds.



### **An uneasy relationship**

The most interesting case, however, is Turkey. With its geographic links with the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, the Southern Caucasus and the Black Sea, Turkey has an enviable location. The country not only serves as a natural hub for the region, but also as a gateway to the Balkans and North Africa.

A decade-long political transformation culminated in 2003 with the election of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, leader of the mildly-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP). Under AKP rule, Turkey has focused on developing a consistent strategy to strengthen its geo-economic position and its role in the international arena, skillfully taking advantage of its specific strengths.

European pundits, overplaying the cultural dimension, have focused the debate on a supposed "Islamization" of Turkey and an exaggerated " neo-Ottoman" element in Ankara's new stance. Finer observers of Turkish affairs can easily dismiss such claims, but this problematic discrepancy between cultural opposition and functionalist European-Turkish interdependence should not, however, be underestimated. The mainstreaming of this discourse may in fact condition the future of relations between Europe and Turkey. Yet, Turkey is now an indispensable partner to Europe in the economic and security arenas, and Europe would harm itself if it restrained engagement in the future.

### **A prominent economic player**

Turkey has witnessed a decade of remarkable economic success, with annual GDP growth averaging 6.6 percent between 2001 and 2008. Sound monetary governance has rebalanced the Turkish economy and brought the inflation rate- Turkey's notorious Achilles' heel- down to single digit in 2005. The economy has also managed to escape the worst of the 2008-9 global financial crisis: GDP has fallen by almost 5 percent in 2009 but the banking system has not collapsed and growth has immediately revived.



Very importantly, this period of economic prosperity has been coupled by a fast-paced integration in the world economy, much in discontinuity with country's traditional inward looking and protectionist model. Trade volume has more than tripled between 2000 and 2009.

Due to territorial proximity and the beneficial effects of a customs union agreement signed in 1996, the EU is Turkey's largest trading partner, receiving over 45 percent of export and providing 41 percent of imports in 2009 but its ties have not been limited to its Western neighbors. High-Level Cooperation Councils have been established with all neighboring countries, from Greece to Syria.

Yet the sector where Ankara's multidirectional strategy is producing the most significant results is energy trade. By leveraging its geographical position, and thanks to its proximity to 72 percent of the world's proven oil and gas reserves, Turkey has pro-actively turned itself into a major energy hub, acting as a bridge between the world's largest energy producers and energy consumers. The country is already a significant outlet for Caspian and Iraqi oil: Two pipelines from Baku and Kirkuk currently supply the Mediterranean terminal of Ceyhan with 1.3 million barrels per day (bpd). The figure is set to double in 2012 as an interconnection with the port of Samsun on the Black Sea is completed. Moreover, Iraq plans to increase its production from 2.4 to 12 bpd in the next six to seven years, and a substantial share of this oil will likely flow northward to Turkey.

In addition, Ankara is set to assume an even more prominent role in the natural gas trade, a highly strategic resource for European countries. European countries find themselves in an uneasy position vis-à-vis supplies from the Russian monopolist Gazprom. Following repeated crises between Russia and transit countries such as Belarus and Ukraine, the diversification of gas suppliers has become imperative for the European Commission. This gives Turkey an opportunity to become the alternative transit route for gas coming from the Caspian basin, Central Asia and indeed the entire Middle East. The recent uprisings in North Africa have



further boosted Ankara's relevance in this respect as fears of political instability and violence will inevitably deter the development of Libyan, Egyptian and Algerian reserves, long considered one of the most promising alternatives to imports from Russia.

### **A spider's web**

Turkey and its pipeline operator BOTAS are one of the driving forces behind the Nabucco pipeline, which, if successful, would bring Azeri, Turkmen and Iraqi gas to Southern and South-Eastern Europe through Turkey. However, Ankara has also granted access to its territorial sector of the Black Sea to the South Stream consortium, a Russian-Italian joint venture that is fiercely competing with Nabucco. The purpose of the strategy is clear: Turkey is fundamental to both the Nabucco and South Stream projects and-whatever the outcome of the battle-the country will be a major transit route for future European gas supplies.

As much as it is a blessing for the Turkish economy and culture to be at the heart of such a vital geostrategic web, the idea that such a position comes with security benefits is misguided. Realistic deterrence in this volatile neighborhood - subject to the changing moods of autocratic rulers and the vicissitudes of an ever-present terrorist threat - requires a strong military presence. With Turkey's growing involvement in 'energy flirts' with Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as a game of energy sector hide-and-seek with Russia and Iran, its need for security has naturally increased and will only become a bigger headache in future.

As a key "hub-state", its own security needs are intertwined with the needs of its partners. If so, wouldn't one argue that a collective security should also be supported appropriately by all of its beneficiaries? The direction in which the EU security architecture has evolved in the past few years, combined with the alleged indirect support of PKK units by some European governments, has made it perhaps harder for Turkey to appreciate European contributions to Euro-Turkish security cooperation.



## **Winning over the skeptics**

How could Turkey enhance a joint security architecture centered on energy cooperation between European and Muslim countries in the region? Firstly, Turkey needs to embed itself deeper within international organizations, through more efficient use of its comparative advantage in intelligence harvesting and trust-building with countries outside the EU's usual sphere. This would enable Ankara to better negotiate its rights and functions on the international stage.

Secondly, while NATO undergoes its second transformation, also known as NATO 3.0, Turkey's position as a staunch ally has come under threat, due to a perceived Islamization of the country. But what is seen as a progressive accommodation with 'rogue states' like Syria and Iran is rather the first piece of a great puzzle called "*zero-problem foreign policy*", Turkey's new foreign stance has been conceptualized and implemented largely as the result of the long-term strategic vision of foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu with Turkey's approach to regional security much more multifaceted than some Western analysts imply. A closer look at the portfolio of new partners, including traditional foes like Armenia, Russia shows that Turkey has not only focused on a Muslim axis, but evolved into a regional pole. It has made serious investments in building a functioning security radius, despite the challenges and risks; among other organizations, Turkey is a major player in the naval task force BLACKSEAFOR, the Development 8 (D8), the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) or the Joint Administration of Turkic Culture and Art (TURKSOY).

Ultimately though, to improve its ties to Europe, Ankara needs to make its process of political transformation more transparent. It will require a committed and concerted effort on the part of Turkey to convince the skeptical minds at the Atlantic Alliance and the EU that these changes are not tending toward the creation of a modern Ottoman caliphate or a Muslim axis. Rather, it should be demonstrated that the position of the 'new Turkey' -



though more assertive and independent - will nevertheless remain compatible with occidental secular and democratic values.

Two major changes in European security identity redlined Turkey as a security player: Since the EU aspired to become a security actor in its own right, NATO's, thus Turkey's, presence in the European safety management has decreased. Secondly, the EU took over the security functions of the Western European Union, where Turkey is Associate Member. This important metamorphose made Turkey in the new European security architecture de facto obsolete. As a matter of fact, the EU Common Security and Defense Policy marginalized Turkey's security role.

### **Future of Euro-Turkish relations**

The categorical exclusion of Turkey from a European security identity and/or EU accession negotiations would have abrupt and serious consequences. For example, Turkey's withdrawal of its application for EU membership might paralyze the operational functionality of Europe's security architecture - especially if Turkey's unique location and regional relationships are kept in mind. Besides a lack of future cooperation in the case of a crisis in the neighborhood, Turkey might also refuse to share its intelligence data with European terrorism task forces. In addition, it could potentially make use of its veto right to prevent the EU from utilizing certain NATO assets.

Europe should instead accept its partner's 'otherness' without trying to drastically change it, but, at the same time, should not be ashamed of engaging in geopolitical strategic maneuvers - necessary in a world of conflicting interests.

Geostrategic interaction between Europe and Turkey, colored as it is by occasional conflict and disagreement, is not the manifest expression of a 'clash of civilizations'. Although the relationship is still characterized by a degree of mistrust, suspicions should be curbed and put into perspective: Turkey started its foreign policy reorientation several decades ago. For



the sake of a safer and more prosperous Euro-Muslim relationship - Turkey should be more deeply integrated into the European security and energy realms, as well as key regional decision-making processes. It will only be through such a determined, collaborative effort, that the foundations of the Euro-Muslim relationship will continue to rest on solid ground now, and in the future.



*Dorukhan Aras has worked as the Assistant to the Representative of the Rector of the United Nations University in New York and held a traineeship in the Human Rights section of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the UN in Geneva. He studied International Relations, with a focus on International Security, at the Université de Genève and Geneva School of Diplomacy and International Relations.*

*An alumnus of the Graduate Institute of International and Developments Studies, Andrea Bonzanni has been a consultant for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and a research assistant for the World Development Report of the World Bank. He regularly comments on energy affairs and international politics at [WorldPoliticsReview.com](http://WorldPoliticsReview.com) and [Affarinternazionali.it](http://Affarinternazionali.it). He is currently a teaching assistant at Sciences-Po in Paris.*