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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) ● Wojciech Lorenz (Managing Editor)
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Turkey at a Tipping Point: Why the EU Should Use Gezi to Rebalance Ankara's Foreign Policy

Pinar Elman

Protests that began over the re-development of Gezi Park in Istanbul and spread throughout the country mark a turning point not just in Turkey's domestic policy but in its foreign policy, too. The protestors demand a pluralistic democracy, rule of law, secularism, decentralisation of power from party elites, greater transparency and non-interference in private life. The EU, which increasingly looks on Turkey as a key regional partner, has an interest in reining in certain aspects of its domestic and foreign policies that seem to have been driven by the ideology of the governing AKP party.

Turkey's Bridging Role

With the end of the Cold War, Turkey started to build closer ties with various countries with which it shares historical and cultural relations. Turkish foreign policy opened up, for instance, to the newly independent states of Central Asia, the Balkans and the Middle East. Since the 1990s, Ankara has been able to enter into dialogue with various actors in the region thanks to the secular and non-interventionist fundamentals of the country's foreign policy, under which Turkey adopts soft-power elements such as public and cultural diplomacy, mediation and economic interdependence.

This makes Turkey more than just another candidate for EU membership. It is a rising power with a growing economy and increasing regional influence. Today, Turkey enjoys a special role in complementing EU foreign policy in those regions where Ankara has special relations. This is witnessed by the EU's enthusiasm for the "Turkish model," which defines the country as an example of a modern, moderate Muslim state with a functioning democracy. Following the Arab uprisings, the European Union has been trying to use Turkey as a bridge to promote EU values in a region where, for historical reasons, European members have often failed to make headway.

Generally speaking, the EU and Turkey have been able to work in relative unison. As Turkey has opened itself up to its neighbours under the so called Zero Problems policy, the EU's sphere of influence has also enlarged, notably to the Middle East and North Africa. Given the conditions for EU candidacy, Turkey's democratic standards and institutions as well as its economic standards provided Ankara with the main elements it needed to exercise its soft power potential. In short, bilateral relations between the pair have been based on a careful balance between Turkey's adherence to European norms and values and an appreciation of its "otherness."

On the face of it, therefore, Ankara's recent departure from European norms in its response to the current social unrest poses a serious challenge for the EU and undoes that balance. Yet, it also offers a chance:

the Gezi Park protestors were objecting to excesses in the governing AKP's behaviour, which are also reflected in Turkey's foreign policy. Moderating these aspects could reassert Turkey's role as a bridge and partner to the EU, although it does not solve the fundamental question whether Turkey will be a partner to the EU or a future part of the bloc.

Domestic Politics as a Source of Foreign Policy

The foreign policy fundamentals that have long sustained Turkey's regional engagement have not survived the deep shifts in domestic politics over recent years. These internal shifts have been shaped by the governing party's adherence to political Islam and fostered by Turkey's relative social stability and economic growth. This has seen the AKP appeal to the economically and socially underprivileged parts of society as well as to the country's conservative middle class. The AKP's rhetoric has comprised religious references, mixed with economic and social justice promises that together aim to build a stronger Turkey based on historical foundations—neo-Ottomanism, in other words.

The AKP's aim is in line with what it sees as those particularities that formerly made the Ottomans a robust empire. Most notably, the AKP has tried to increase religious sentiment in the country at the expense of secularism. It has also aimed to maintain domestic political and economic stability by increasingly sacrificing Turkey's pluralistic democracy and transparency. As well, it has aimed to strengthen its party rule at home by making political and administrative appointments that have principally benefited its supporters.

The main foreign policy lines pursued by the AKP reflect these shifts in its domestic policies. Religious, historical and economic interests as well as the empowerment of the party and its interests constitute the main drivers of AKP foreign policy. It is not just, therefore, that the AKP aims to protect the economic and trade interests of the Turkish middle class in its foreign policy. The party pursues a fully-fledged international vision of a neo-Ottoman Turkey. This would see Ankara leading in regions where Turkey has historical and cultural ties, notably the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa.

Four Key Shifts: Building the 'Great Turkey' through Foreign Policy

The AKP's aim to build a strong Turkey at home translates into an emerging vision of a "Great Turkey" abroad: its foreign policy corresponds with a romantic notion of an Ankara that stands up against international injustice, protects the weak, and leads the Muslim World, just as the Ottoman Khalif did. The party has duly considered the potential that an AKP-ised Turkey could have in the region, and in the Muslim world more broadly, and identifies its strengths in the country's political Islamism and its growing economic power. In the wake of the Arab Spring, it has therefore projected itself as the "big brother" of weak and disregarded regions, backing this rhetoric with direct investments.

By means of political, economic and cultural instruments, the AKP government aims to be the playmaker that shapes the region on its own terms. This party-politicisation of foreign policy is particularly clear in four recent shifts in the fundamentals that have long sustained Turkey's international approach:

The first major change in Turkish foreign policy during the AKP era has been the rhetoric of Turkey turning its back on the West. This more independent course pleases Turks who have what the academic Soli Özel once called "lone-wolf syndrome": public opinion polls show that Turks would indeed like their country to maintain maximum scope for a unilateral track without being party to an overarching alliance, mainly due to their lack of trust in their potential partners. Popular appreciation among the public for the prime minister's anti-Western rhetoric can be interpreted from this angle. It has, however, undermined relations with the EU. Within the Great Turkey ideology, the EU-membership prospect cannot have any sense beyond the economic; and, indeed, the government has come to rely upon the economic benefits from Turkey's candidacy status, with the economy heavily dependent on foreign investment.

The second shift has been the demise of the principle of international non-interference. Echoing the more intrusive and ambitious scope of action by the government at home, Turkey has intervened in the internal affairs of other states, deepening its relations with certain groups in countries of the region. This was particularly clear in the case of Syria, with Turkey actively supporting Syrian opposition groups in their efforts to topple the Ba'ath regime. This interventionist foreign policy has, however, undermined the

traditionally peaceful nature of Turkish foreign policy, represented under the motto of “peace at home, peace in the World.”

The third major change has been the replacement of secularism by a more sectarian foreign policy. Turkey’s foreign policy traditionally relied upon domestic secularism to handle sectarian and ethnic divisions abroad. With the Arab uprisings, however, the AKP identified an opportunity to shape the region according to its own interests, viewing itself as the “play-maker in the region”. As a consequence, the AKP government has sided with Sunni groups and in some cases with the Muslim Brotherhood, which represent only a particular Sunni group in the Arab world. This was clear when it emphasised that Damascus was a “Nusayri minority regime” during its support to the Sunni opposition in Syria, and in its more intimate relations with Hamas rather than with Fatah.

A final important change—and one that in light of the structural dialogue between Brussels and Ankara requires a few extra words—involves the actors charged with carrying out Turkey’s foreign policy. Just as in its broader approach to domestic politics, the AKP has reshaped the country’s foreign policy institutions, decision-giving mechanisms and decision-makers according to its party interests. Thus, the party ideology has become the predominant source of Turkish foreign policy, and decision-making mechanisms have been shaped according to AKP’s centralisation of power around its party structure and accordingly with the lack of transparency in its foreign policy initiatives.

The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is one of the oldest institutions in the country, and its institutional memory has long provided a strong input to Turkey’s policymakers. However, as the AKP has started to transform Turkey’s civilian democracy into party-tutelage, the government has preferred to follow the new lines of its own ideology and has overlooked the MFA’s expertise. Moreover, the government also aims to replace state officials who are decision-makers with party members, and the government has recently proposed a law that would permit anybody with just five years of work experience to be appointed as one of the top decision-makers for foreign policy.

The prime minister has also upgraded the National Security Agency (MIT), whose head he appoints, and the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA). The agency’s overseas development assistance programme (ODA) is in line with Ankara’s aim to be a leading country and also in accordance with Ankara’s rhetoric to Turkey’s “historical responsibility” to give aid to specific regions. Turkish development aid and Turkish non-governmental organisations have therefore opened hundreds of schools and universities in the region for thousands of foreign students. This has also chimed with the AKP’s goal of overhauling the current international order, which, according to Ankara, fails to distribute global justice. In turn, Ankara has profited from these special relations by an increase in the outreach of its soft power and international image.

A Turkish Megali Idea and Its Risks

This general shift in policy has been criticised at home: A poll conducted by Kadir Has University shows that in 2012 only 34.7% of respondents judged Turkey’s foreign policy as successful.¹ It has clearly undermined many of the foundations of Turkish regional influence—the country’s strong links to the EU, its secularism and its non-interventionism, for instance, and this has in turn forced the government to seek out new and more divisive sources of influence, including relations with religious groups and radical, dethroned governments. In this context, one can make an allusion to the ill-fated Greek irredentist notion of Megali Idea (literally, “Great Idea”): Ankara is today accused of acting on borrowed time by seeking to bring the former Ottoman territories and the Muslim World under its sphere of influence.

Yet, the EU has been slow to notice the attendant risks. With the Muslim Brotherhood winning elections in Tunisia and Egypt, the bloc has promoted the idea of the “Turkish model”. Yet, defining such a model by its “moderate Muslim” character reduces it to the political Islamism of the AKP model, undermining the secular character of the Turkish state and citizens. The “moderate Islam” aspect of the “Turkish model” is therefore not one that would be particularly suited to a bridging role, since it alienates a large portion of Turkish society.

¹ “Türkiye Sosyal-Siyasal Eğilimler Araştırması Sonuçları” [Survey on Socio-Political Trends in Turkey], *Kadir Has University*, 2012, www.khas.edu.tr/news/799/455/Khas-2012-Tuerkiye-Sosyal-Siyasal-Egilimler-Arastirmasi-Sonuclari-Aciklandi.html.

By emphasising the political Islamist party's character in defining the Turkish Model, the EU has overlooked the AKP's disrespect for shared values abroad, too: the Turkish prime minister, for example, has denied accusations of war crimes aimed at Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, giving a religious explanation and ignoring a ruling to the contrary by the International Criminal Court (ICC). In general, therefore, the AKP ideology has sought to situate Turkey in the centre of the Muslim world, rather than between the West and the Muslims or in the EU's waiting room. This has gained resonance in the region, and the ideological leader of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradewi, has recently declared his full support for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in his reaction to the protests.

Yet, there has been much anger in the region, too. This interventionist and sectarian policy has favoured party interests over national interests, not least by putting Turkey at odds with many of its neighbours. Since the beginning of the Syria conflict, Ankara has found itself at loggerheads not only with Damascus, but also with Baghdad, Tehran and, to a lesser degree because of their strong economic relations, with Moscow. Moreover, this policy has greatly reduced Turkey's ability to speak to different groups at the same time, undermining Turkey's role as a mediator. Thus, Ankara's aim to shape the region has not only undermined the peaceful nature of traditional Turkish foreign policy but has also damaged its potential.

The Domestic Implications for Turkey

Even before the Gezi Park protests, there had been something of a boomerang effect for Ankara: the sectarian and interventionist nature of the AKP's foreign policy had begun stirring up tensions at the domestic level. One sign of this was the re-emergence of divisions between Turkey's diverse religions. The Turkish leaders' anti-Alawite motives in courting Sunni support for their interventionist Syria policy jeopardises the stability of domestic society. This makes the ethnic balances even more sensitive in areas such as the tinderbox southern city of Hatay, which is at the same time home to Nusayris (Arab Alawites) and hosts members of the Free Syrian army fighting the Assad regime who are also of Nusayri faith. This is just one of a number of situations that make Turkey more exposed to sectarian conflicts in the region.

In order to avoid criticism at home, AKP leaders have accused opponents of stalling a strategy that would build the Great Turkey and have further reduced transparency in its foreign affairs. The AKP has withheld information from parliament, for instance, on its level of support for the Syrian opposition. A telling example of this occurred during summer 2012 when the AKP reportedly allowed international jihadists² to use Turkey for transit purposes whilst publicly denying its support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) despite contrary declarations from the FSA and information from international media.³ Moreover, a group of MPs from the Republican Party (CHP) were illegally denied access to the Apaydin refugee camp when they wanted to visit the camp over allegations that illegal military training was occurring there.

Indeed, the prime minister and his closest circles are said to share little information on the details of their foreign policies, and critics accuse the AKP of having undermined Turkey's statist traditions in this regard. The opposition parties highlight, for instance, that the dinner that took place between Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Barack Obama in Washington, D.C., on 16 May did not include MFA officials, and thus there is no protocol for detailing any bargains struck.⁴ Similarly, the public and the parliament are still to be informed about the details of negotiations that took place between PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the AKP government. Those criticising the lack of transparency are accused of being against the emergence of the Great Turkey, and in turn, the public is expected to give full support to the government in response to these opponents.

Altering the principles of traditional foreign policy without taking full account of Turkey's alliances, capacities and resources, coupled with its centralisation of power and the lack of transparency in its initiatives, the AKP government has left Turkey, a NATO member, more exposed than usual to external dangers. This has become clear during the Syria crisis. Ankara has proved unable to protect its citizens from the consequences of its active foreign policy, leaving the country under missile threat from Syria.

² M. Cholov, "Syria: Foreign Jihadists Could Join Battle for Aleppo," *The Guardian*, 30 July 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/30/syria-foreign-jihadists-aleppo-al-qaida.

³ L. Kemal, "Inside Free Syrian Army's Headquarters in Turkey," *Al-Monitor*, 22 August 2012, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/08/inside-the-free-syrian-armys-turkish-hq.html.

⁴ "Opposition slams PM's meeting with U.S. leader," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 22 May 2013, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opposition-slams-pms-meeting-with-us-leader.aspx?PageID=238&NID=47336&NewsCatID=338.

Ankara had to request air defence systems. A similar story led to the Reyhanli bombings that caused the deaths of 53 people, the deadliest terrorist attack in Turkey's history. Thus, the aim to build the Great Turkey by shifting the fundamental principles of Turkish foreign policy provides hints of an adventurous Megali Idea that could have negative consequences for the entire country.

All this throws into question the AKP's interest in acting as a bridge for the EU. AKP leaders have not desisted from occasionally discrediting Turkey's Western allies or the current international order when this might strengthen their hand with their chosen regional partners. During the Israel– Hamas conflict in November, for instance, the government was accused of undermining Turkey's western allies, and the current international system, while deflecting any criticism of Hamas's abuses of Palestinians' rights. Indeed, in such situations the AKP has been more a source of polarisation between the EU and the region than a facilitator of mediation, and the "Turkish model" that has been reduced to the "AKP model" has not always represented shared values.⁵

Post-Gezi Turkey

This all means that the protests that have recently spread throughout Turkey in response to the excessive police reaction to an environmental protest in Gezi Park in Istanbul have implications for Turkey's foreign policy. The protests are not ideological, and a large part of the protestors are not affiliated with a particular party. However, the demands concerning domestic politics—respect for the rule of law, fundamental rights and freedoms, a pluralist democracy, secularism, and decentralisation of power—clearly relate to an AKP-isation of the political system, and will have an impact on the country's approach to foreign policy. The government reaction to the demonstrations provides a considerable challenge to the EU, but the social reaction provides an opportunity, too.

Prior to the protests, the rather distant political relations between the EU and Turkey had actually been showing signs of improvement, as the EU recognised that Turkey was drifting away with all the strategic assets it represents to the bloc. The electoral success of the Socialist Party in France in May 2012 allowed Brussels to unblock one of Turkey's negotiation chapters. However, as MEPs have voiced criticism of Ankara's recent violation of the political criteria of EU accession, the Turkish prime minister has declared he does not recognise the EU Parliament. Ankara's violent reactions to the Gezi protests have also given occasion to Germany as well as Austria and the Netherlands to voice opposition to the already unpopular prospect of opening a further negotiation chapter in the EU accession talks. With the protestors demanding their government show more respect for the principles that are, at the same time, shared-European values, this possibility of further closing the enlargement perspective has been perceived with considerable ambivalence in Turkish society.

Indeed, the EU's actions risk strengthening the negative trends in Turkey's foreign policy. With the AKP's popularity decreasing among the pro-democracy and secular Arab groups in Turkey and abroad, the government has been receptive to more sympathetic actors. As noted, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the ideological leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, has declared his full support for Prime Minister Erdoğan in dealing with the protestors. With the EU negotiations process blocked, one can expect to see relations between the AKP and the Brotherhood become rather closer. Moreover, it is the EU that has the most to lose from this. After all, the strategic partnership between Turkey and the U.S. is likely to continue. Turkey is also home to the American Incirlik military base and hosts American radar as part of the planned NATO Missile Defence System. The two countries already share common interests concerning Syria, and the U.S. can be a temperate influence on Turkish action in this regard.

The proposed EU–U.S. Free Trade Agreement (TTIP) can potentially increase the tensions between the EU and Turkey. Despite being a member to the EU Customs Union for 17 years, Turkey is not included in EU free-trade negotiations with third countries, as a result of which Turkey is exposed to unfair competition. If the TTIP does not include Turkey, its economy faces serious consequences. Although the U.S. has agreed to sign a separate free trade agreement with Turkey, it is unlikely that the U.S. Senate would approve it as long as the current AKP government is in power in the wake of the recent crisis in Israel. Despite Israel's U.S.-brokered apology on March 2013, the "normalisation" process may slow down with the

⁵ P. Elman, "Turkey's Role in Hamas' Cease-fire: A Sign of Turkish Cooperation or Competition?," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 7 (460), 16 January 2013, www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-7-460.

upcoming local elections in 2014 in Turkey, and this would make the approval of trade agreements by the Senate even more difficult. Turkish officials have previously voiced their intention to revise the customs union based on the EU–U.S. deal. Thus, not only political relations but also economic and trade relations between the EU and Turkey may deteriorate under the current foreign policy.

Conclusion

Over the last few years, Turkey has experienced deep shifts in its domestic politics. The ruling party has increasingly centralised the power around its leadership and aimed to increase religious sentiment within the country under the rhetoric of building a Great Turkey, even at the expense of the separation of powers, rule of law, pluralistic democracy and secularism. This has affected Turkish foreign policy, which has increasingly come under the monopoly of the ruling party and has seen fundamental principles such as secularism and non-interference diminish in importance. This has not only damaged the attractiveness of the “Turkish model,” but has narrowed Turkey’s reach as well as draw the country into regional conflicts. The ongoing protests at home will therefore directly affect Turkish foreign policy as well.

Although the government’s reactions to the protests have damaged Turkey’s international standing, the peaceful nature of the demonstrations and the protestors’ commitment to shared European values have done much to upgrade Turkish society’s image abroad. Moreover, the elements the protestors ask for—de-centralisation of power away from the ruling party, transparency, a pluralistic democracy, the respect for the rule of law and secularism—would entail a return to the traditional fundamentals of Turkish foreign policy, doing so would positively affect Turkey’s soft power capacities. If protestors’ demands are met, this would help to redefine the “Turkish model” around democratic and secular principles, and Turkey, as a mid-size power influential in the EU’s neighbourhood could export shared European values in regions where Ankara has clout.

In addition, if Ankara re-complies with the Copenhagen Criteria⁶ the EU will not only prevent the emergence of an unstable country with an increasingly authoritarian regimes at its borders but also will set its Member States on course to secure their strategic interests in the energy field as well as in the economy, trade, and foreign and security policy. In turn, Turkish foreign policy would once again prioritise truly national interests and, through the adoption of shared values, would consolidate its relations with the EU more on a structural basis rather than an opportunistic and conjectural one. Therefore, it is in the Member States’ clear interest to have pluralistic democracy in Turkey committed to shared values, as Turkey’s cooperation in areas of common interests will be reinforced if its domestic policies are made through a system respecting the separation of powers, rule of law and transparency.

Enlargement policy has long ranked as the EU’s most successful tool for transforming countries bordering the Union thanks to its so called carrots and sticks approach. However, the “sticks” can be effective only if the EU has leverage in the candidate country. At this tipping point for Turkey’s domestic and foreign policies, and despite the moral hazard involved in re-engaging the enlargement perspective, the Member States simply cannot allow themselves to be absent from Turkish politics. The further centralisation of power around AKP will otherwise not only narrow Turkey’s foreign policy reach but will also have negative consequences for Member States’ diplomatic and strategic interests. Therefore, the Member States, while strengthening their ties with the Turkish public, should also regain their leverage in Turkish politics through EU enlargement policy. The Europeanisation of Turkey through the opening of a new negotiation chapter is therefore in the Member States’ own national strategic, diplomatic and security interests.

⁶ Copenhagen Criteria are the essential conditions all candidate countries must satisfy to become a Member State. They include three criteria: political, economic, and acceptance of the Community *acquis*. The European Council of December 2004 confirmed that Turkey fulfils the Copenhagen political criteria, which are a prerequisite for opening accession negotiations with Turkey. For more information, see “Accession Criteria,” European Commission, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria_en.htm.