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REGIONALIZATION OF THE TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY



**WISE MEN CENTER
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**

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BILGESAM PUBLICATIONS



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FOREWORD

Making predictions for the future by closely following developments at home and abroad, conducting scientific research on bilateral and multilateral relations and the security strategies of Turkey, as well as on domestic problems in political, economic, technological, environmental and socio-cultural areas, providing also decision-makers with practical recommendations, policy options, and proposals in line with the national interests are all included in the foundation purposes of Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM). BILGESAM, with regard to the resolutions taken in Wise Man Board's first meeting, is preparing reports to fulfill the purposes quoted above.

The report under the name of "Regionalization of the Turkish Foreign Policy, prepared by the Former Ambassador Özdem Sanberk,ü evaluates the causes and the consequences of the Middle East axis of Turkish foreign policy by analyzing Turkey's internal and external dynamics in order to estimate Turkish foreign relations' new vision.

Assoc. Prof. Atilla Sandıklı
President of BILGESAM

REGIONALIZATION OF THE TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

If Turkey focuses on full accession to the European Union, it would progress in political, social and economic areas, which would certainly bring about encompassing peace, stability, prosperity and democratic advances throughout the Middle East.

Realities Underlying the Axis Discussions

Axis discussions of Turkish foreign policy took over a large part of 2009 and they are still continuing. What is certain is that in the last years, especially in 2009, the scope of Turkish external relations has expanded, and it seems that its course has been largely regionalized. The Middle East has gained importance in Turkey's priorities. The world's changing conditions have, without any doubt, played an important role in this evolution. Apart from these changes in Turkey's foreign agenda, is there a more serious change of course for Turkey's foreign relations? If there is, what are the reasons for change and what are the differences can be seen from preceding years?

First of all, it must be noted that there is a reality not to be forgotten: foreign policy cannot remain static. The world renews itself every day and countries that are not able to adapt themselves to changing conditions will pay the price. It is only the ideological and dogmatic states, coupled with antidemocratic regimes which are closed to the external world, that do not regard world's agenda and its' changing world values and balances of power.

Internal Dynamics

Foreign policy is also a result of internal dynamics. In the past few years, and especially in 2009, there have been some changes in Turkey's internal politics that have in turn influenced external relations.

The first of these factors is Ahmet Davutođlu. Taking office as the Foreign Affairs Minister since May 2009, he is an academician who believes that Turkish foreign policy has to be re-discussed and re-conceptualized. He thinks that it is time for Turkey to play a role in the world arena. It is seen that Davutođlu is set to realize this aim immediately.

The second factor is related to the identity of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in charge since 2002. The Justice and Development Party is formed by authorities who do not reject Turkey's place in Europe and Atlantic community, attaching importance to Muslim solidarity in both its' region and in the world. Turkey's growing distance with Israel in last years prove AKP's stance to the Muslim world.

The interests of this party to Turkey's region and the Muslim world is not confined to Islam solidarity. The Erdoğan administration is well aware of the potential and the current opportunities in trade, energy and economic cooperation in the geography including its region, Russia, the Caucasus and the Central Asia. It futher aims at the best use of these possibilities and the potential.

The third factors are the developments in the Middle East that occured out of Turkey's will and control: the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, dimensions of Israel-Palestinian conflict and Iran's nuclear aims.

The fourth reason for Turkish diplomacy to head towards the region is related to the responses of European leaders like Sarkozy and Merkel concerning Turkey's European integration goal and the broken promises especially about resolving the Cyprus problem. The fact that Cypriot Greeks had been accepted to the European Union, although they rejected the UN's EU-supported peace and unification plan,are allowed to veto Turkey's EU accession, and continue the isolation of Cypriot Turks, are all within this framework.

The final point is the political, economic, sociological, cultural changes and dynamism of Turkish internal policy. The content and qualification of this dynamism, which is reflected through political polarization and serious tension embodying both radicalization and democratization seeds, cannot be understood by Turkey's European or American allies. It cannot be said that it is understood by Turkish people themselves either. Questions of

whether these dynamics would evolve into more democratization or more radicalization are occupying people's minds.

Stable Parameters

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, while these factors have caused changes in Turkish priorities and the direction of its' multidimensional external relations, it must be noted that Turkish foreign policy has some fundamental principles for the last 87 years. In the past, Turkish foreign policy prioritized regional relations from time to time.. Even at that time, it did not abandon its' fundamental principles. Turkey today, as it did in the past within the scope of same principles, works for the protection of territorial integrity and for the contribution to evaluate economic prosperity of its surrounding states. Turkey acts with the consciousness that with these policies guarantee its own security and economic development.

Turkey's Middle East Policy

In 2009, Turkey started to play a more effective role in the Middle East partially because of the afromentioned reasons. Turkey's regional policy is applied within the framework of guiding principles, such as establishing contacts and holding dialogue with all actors, including non-state actors; recognition of all election results worldwide, including Palestine and Iran; condensing economic and cultural contacts with regional countries; enhancement of cooperation with all international organizations to guarantee maximum benefit of these contacts. While these guiding principles are applied to the Western Balkans (former Ottoman territory), the Caucasus, and the Caspian basin, or to the Black Sea region, they are not applicable to Turkish relations with Europe or America.

Ottoman Geography

This observation presents the Turkish foreign policy priority attached to former Ottoman lands. Taking into consideration the difficulties that are seen in relations with the European Union, it would be easy to explain Turkey's will to use the relative advantages of its historical, humanistic, cultural and linguistic ties in old Ottoman territories, not because of any ideological or nostalgic motives but because of rational and pragmatic ones. Besides, if these historical and cultural facts are set aside, the fact that the Middle East embodies both security threats, possibilities and opportunities in energy and economy for Turkey explain the reasons why Turkey gives priority to this region.

Peace Basins

Another specificity of Turkish foreign policy, as explained above, is Turkey's efforts to create peace basins in its region which is full of instability and insecurity. The conceptualization of 'zero problem policy with neighbors' by Davutoğlu is not a new parameter for Turkish foreign policy. But since 2002, Erdoğan's AKP government has enriched this principle by new initiatives and has implemented them actively. The last examples of these implementations are seen in protocols signed with Armenia, the lifting of visas with Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, and the establishment of a Ministers Council with these countries. Turkey's initiatives for stability and order in the region are also in favor of its' western allies. It cannot be forgotten that the destinies of Europe, the Atlantic community and the Middle East are strictly intertwined. But European countries like France and (to some extent) Germany do not consider the diplomatic efficiency gained by Turkey to the advantage of the European Union's regional common interests but instead they evaluate it from the perspective of the power balances and rivalry approaches of 19th century. It is unfortunate that Europe avoids dialogue with Turkey, not even opening Turkey's energy chapter of the EU accession process.

Thus the third quality of this regionalization constitutes the energy dimension and the energy cooperation potential, where Turkish interests coincide with those of the European Union. Erdoğan's government continues to progress in economic, trade, energy and investment relations, all started during the Özal period, particularly within the region and neighboring countries. It also implements strategies such as: turning the dimension of energy and economy of foreign relations into the acting tools of Turkey's foreign policy; increasing, to a large extent, the rate of reciprocal tourism with the neighbouring countries in Turkish foreign trade.

Charge of Regionalism

The rise of Turkish diplomacy's visibility in the region is not compatible with the politics of American and European allies.. But it is evident that American, European, and Middle East policies are not identical. Turkey acting autonomously from Western allies, particularlyly the United States, can be especially seen by their differences of opinion on the issues of Iran and Israel-Palestine.

All along, good relations with Iran are one of the unchanging foundations of Turkish foreign and security policy. It is clear that regime differences and competition with Turkey, along with differences of opinion and tensions, have never seriously influenced the peace atmosphere for centuries. Besides the two countries have been cooperating on energy issues in the last years and from time to time, they share similar opinions on security issues against terrorist acts.

Regionalism Can Be Permanent

If Turkey's western alternative was closed, then it is likely that regionalization of Turkish diplomacy would become a permanent tendency.. In this case, in the short and long term, pursuit of solidarity in Middle East and the world of Islam would dominate.

It is also clear that the aims of Iran to become a nuclear power are not compatible with Turkey's interests. Turkey is using its persuasive manner to deter its eastern neighbor from this aim. Turkey wants to assist the International Energy Agency. Nevertheless, Turkey is against the sanctions against that are to be applied by the United Nations Security Council. Within Turkish diplomatic circles, there is a dominant opinion that sanctions and isolation policies against Iran are not yielding results. Since the possible consequences of such policies in Iraq and in Cyprus are quite apparent, it is not possible that Turkey can support UNSC sanctions on Iran. Moreover, in case Iran violates the sanctions, it is not clear which further steps would be taken by international community. It is generally known that a military intervention would cause indefinable disasters and suffering. For this reason, Turkey tries to solve the problem within the region by holding dialogue with Iran. But Iran policy of delaying solutions could land the problem on the UNSC's agenda. It would then be inevitable that Turkey finds itself within the group of radical countries given its current attitude.

Although the opposition parties' opinion in Turkey regarding the probable threats of sanctions applied to Iran is not clear, the great majority of Turkish public opinion is against these sanctions. In this case, the Iran subject naturally becomes a divergent point between Turkey and the United States, Israel and certain European countries.

Hamas

Another divergence between Turkey, the United States and Israel is Turkey's relation with Hamas. Turkey wants to play a role between this non-state actor and international community, regarding the Palestinian matter. However, it is not difficult to see that Israel, the United States and some Arab regimes in the Middle East are disturbed because of such an initiative. Of course, if this role improves the chance for peace, Turkey would be appreciated by all the parties involved. Contact with Hamas has been recently emphasized by the European Union, therefore proving the efficiency of Turkey's policy being the first country to negotiate with the organization.

Relations with the United States

Turkey's Middle East relations have an important place in its relations with the United States. In the past, relations between Turkey and the United States were based on Turkey's non-active policy towards the Middle East, its rather neutral policy, its good relations and de

factor alliance with Israel. However, this time, it is growingly evident that this situation has completely changed.

President Obama's first visit to Turkey shows that the March 1st 2003 bill crisis' effects (in which Turkey's Grand Assembly refused use of Turkish territory to American troops for the war in Iraq) have completely disappeared, at least on governmental level. In the Bush period, Turkey and the United States showed their volition to set aside the crises' effects by increased cooperation acts, like sharing intelligence against the PKK. The question is whether this mutual trust will be sustainable when Turkey becomes an independent actor from United States in the Middle East, with its' low level relations with Israel and increasing relations with Iran.

Interests and Problem Areas

Erdogan's last visit to Washington D.C. is an important sign of mutual trust, despite these divergences and Turkey's independent policies in the Middle East. Yet, subjects between Turkey and the United States are not limited to Iran or the Palestinian problem. First and above all, Turkey and the United States are important allies within NATO. They share the belief that, particularly in Afghanistan, working together in the region would be useful for their mutual interests. While there are divergences in some subjects, they are aware that they agree on many subjects like Iraq, the Caucasus and energy cooperation.

Ethnic Lobbies

However, in the United States, there are opposing politicians and strong ethnic lobbies which want relations between Washington and Ankara to break down. It is not difficult to guess that year 2010 would end up being a power struggle between Turkish opposing lobbies and the Obama administration in Washington. Turkey's success and premonition of its policies in its region would be influential in this power struggle.

A World Power?

In 2009, Turkey became a UNSC non-permanent member and G-20 country, opening Turkish foreign policy to Africa, South America and Oceania. Turkey's becoming a world power is no doubt a common wish for the general Turkish public. But Turkey is not yet the United States, or China, or India in terms of world prominence. The rational allocation of limited resources is a valid principle in foreign policy. Determining priorities and focusing on these goals would certainly be rational behavior.

CONCLUSION

On the one hand, incidents and developments in Turkey's region and the Middle East,, andlikewise, the policies of the AKP government have improved Turkey's profile in the Middle East and the Muslim world.On the other hand, Turkey's economic and strategic interests will hold Turkey and European/Atlantic world together within the same alliance.

However, if Turkey's Western option is closed for some reason, then it is highly probable that Turkish regionalization would become a permanent tendency. In this case, in short and long term, the highly sought and appealing force of Middle East and Muslim world solidarity, unmatched by Europe, can be regarded as certain. Unsurprisingly, regionalization of Turkey's external relations will induce the radicalization of Turkish foreign policy. Internal and external policy dynamics influence each other. Radicalization in foreign policy brings the risk of domestic radicalization. This would firstly harm Turkey's reform efforts oriented to modern democracy. This harm will also influence regional democratic tendencies.

On the other hand, if Turkey receives the positive response from the European Union that it deserves, if it can focus on the accession and the full membership process, then it is clear that democratic progress, along with political, social and economic developments in Turkey, will result in peace, stability, prosperity and democratic progress in the Middle East and beyond. The upcoming years will show the first signs of what will come of Turk'sh foreign policy in the nera future.

* This report is published at Radikal (a Turkish daily newspaper) on January 5-6, 2010.

Özdem SANBERK

Former Ambassador

Being the Former Undersecretary of Foreign Ministry, the former ambassador Özdem Sanberk graduated from Galatasaray High School and the Faculty of Law at Istanbul University. As the official of the Foreign Ministry, Özdem Sanberk took some offices at the embassies of Madrid, Amman, Bonn and Paris and at the Permanent Representation Offices of OECD and the UNESCO. Furthermore, he was the foreign policy advisor during Prime Minister Turgut Özal's period.

Mr. Sanberk was the permanent representative before the European Community between 1987-1991. He worked as the Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs during the years 1991-19995 and as the Turkish ambassador to London during 1995-2000.

Being retired in 2000, Sanberk worked as the Director of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV). Currently, he conducts studies at think tanks such as BILGESAM (Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies), GPOT (Global Political TrendsCenter)and GIFGRF (Global Relations Forum.) Moreover, his essays and views are published at various media organs.

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