

COMMENTARY

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What Drives Turkey?

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On May 23, the President of Turkey Abdullah Gul published an article in the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Jarida*, in which he publicly revealed how the elite of the Turkish regime sees the world that surrounds it. The article titled *Turkey's New Path*, reads as follows (translated by the author):

Recently, Turkey has been in the forefront of international economic and political discussions. On one hand, despite the economic crisis that is washing over neighbouring Europe, Turkey remains the state with the second fastest growing economy in the world, after China. On the other hand, there is almost no discussion of world problems, from Iraq and Afghanistan to Somalia, Iran and the Arab Spring, and from the promotion of development to inter-cultural dialog, where Turkey does not fill a prominent role.

This is a new phenomenon to a certain extent, because as recently as ten years ago Turkey was not thought of as more than a strong NATO ally. The situation began to change in 2002 (in the year when Islam rose to power in Turkey) when a new morning of political stability dawned, which enabled the emergence of a more powerful Turkish image, along with the will and commitment to realize this image.

In order to implement this goal the (Islamist) governments of Turkey since 2002 began to carry out courageous economic reforms, which paved the way for continual growth and a protective shield against the economic crisis that broke out in 2008. As a result of this, the Turkish GNP has tripled, and Turkey has become the state with the 16th largest economy in the world. Likewise, Turkey has benefited from a strong public budget,

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because of an intelligent monetary policy, from fixed dynamics of debt, from an organized banking system and from smoothly operating credit markets.

At the same time we have acted to broaden the range of individual freedoms (what about the press that the regime silences because of official criticism?) which were subjugated for a long time (during the secular regime) because of security fears, as we acted to broaden the relations between the military and the citizenry (by subjugating the military to the Islamic regime) and the promise of social and cultural rights. We have devoted the greatest attention to the problems of ethnic minorities (for the Kurds too?) and religious minorities (for the Greek Orthodox too?). These reforms have turned Turkey into an active and living democracy, a more stable society living in peace with itself, able to see the external environment (Europe, the Arab and Islamic world) in a different way (more so than in the past).

We have simply stopped thinking of our geography and our history (as the Ottoman Empire) as a curse or as something negative, and we've begun, on the contrary, to see our place in the junction between Europe, Asia and the Middle East, as an opportunity for interaction with many players simultaneously (and to become a regional power). As a result, we've begun to extend our hands to the neighbouring states and to the states beyond them, in an effort to broaden the political dialog, to open shared economic connections and to strengthen mutual societal and cultural understanding (with a policy of zero conflicts that Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has developed). Despite the fact that ten years is too short a time to make an accurate evaluation of this ambitious policy, we have clearly succeeded to a great extent. For example, we've succeeded to quadruple our trade with our neighbours, and many times we have played an effective role in strengthening the efforts towards reconciliation and peace-making. However, the most important thing is that Turkey has become an example of success that many surrounding states aspire to emulate.

Despite all this, even one or two years ago, some political commentators were wondering "Who lost Turkey?" or "Where is Turkey headed?" because it seemed to them that Turkey had turned its external political axis away from the West. The reality is that Turkey's external trends have remained as they were, because they depend on Turkish values that are shared with the West, and what did change is our increased insistence on the need to work harder to ensure a greater degree of stability and personal well-being in our area, which is expressed by our support of freedom, democracy and responsibility, not only to ourselves but also toward others (also the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq?).

This trend was reflected in our attitude toward the Arab Spring, which Turkey supported enthusiastically right from the beginning. We did not hesitate or avoid supporting those who are struggling for their rights and their dignity, and actually Turkey is seen as the

most active and effective partner in assisting states such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, which are trying even now to implement the changes that began among them on the institutional plane. We spare no efforts to help these states, and we give them tangible support in the form of economic cooperation and in building political capabilities.

In Syria, despite this, the revolution has not yet borne fruit, because of the barbaric oppression that the regime uses against its opposition. Every day dozens of people who only seek dignity are killed, and Turkey invests most of its efforts in alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people, but unfortunately, the performance of the international community as a whole in providing an effective response to this crisis, has been poor so far.

The position of Turkey regarding the Iranian nuclear project was similarly clear: We strenuously object to the presence of weapons of mass destruction in our area, and it's clear that attempts to create WMD or to procure them might instigate an arms race on a regional scale. That is why we have always called for turning the Middle East, including Iran and Israel, into an area without WMD.

We support the right of Iran to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, but the Iranian nuclear project must be transparent, and its leaders must prove to the international community the non-military character of the project. The key to achieving this goal centres on bridging the gap between lack of faith and preparing the way for an effective dialog. In April we hosted the opening meeting of renewed negotiations between the international community and Iran.

For the sake of clarity on this matter: There is no military solution to this problem. Military intervention will only complicate the problem by creating new layers of conflict in our region and beyond. The reality is that Turkey is investing great efforts in this matter and other matters in order to function as a "positive force", which compels us to find the right fit between our national interests and values such as justice, democracy and human dignity, and to act for realization of our foreign policy goals, but by mutual cooperation, not by force.

Effective multilateral action is a major aspect of this view, because Turkey served as a member in the Security Council of the UN during the years 2009- 2010, and it aspires to another term during the years 2015-2016. Because of the great importance of current developments in this part of the world, the involvement of Turkey in the Security Council assures that it will have great value. In the year 2015, we will also have the presidency of the Group of 20 (G-20), and we will need to invest most of our efforts in turning it into a more effective mechanism for global control.

The economic change that Turkey underwent during the past decade, places it in an ideal position to bring efficiency to the whole region, and in the future, also to global society. Despite the fact that we have achieved much, even more is demanded from us. In view of the challenges that confront our neighbours (Syria and the rebellion, Iraq and the Iranian hegemony, Iran and the internal stability as a result of international pressure, Israel and its threats on Iran) and the central role that the region plays in international affairs, Turkey does not hesitate to take upon itself new areas of responsibility.

This concludes the article of Abdullah Gul. The article reflects the way in which the Turkish leadership thinks of itself as a regional power. It does not relate to problems between Turkey and Israel, because – in my opinion – it sees Israel as a problem too small to consider. The only mention of Israel is in the nuclear context, with veiled criticism and comparison to Iran. It ignores the issue of peace between Israel and her neighbours, since Turkey failed in its efforts to mediate between Israel and Syria in the days of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Gul also does not relate to the issue of joining the European Union, and he ignored the insult that Europe caused to Turkey when it refused to accept it into the Union. In light of the present economic condition of Europe, he, and many other Turks are fairly content that they were not accepted into the European Union, because the last thing that Turkey wants is to support the Greek economy. Compared to the economic disaster of Europe—economic growth of approximately one percent—Turkey is an economic paradise with an average eight percent growth in all recent years.

Here it is fitting to bring two responses that were attached to Gul's article in the Internet site *Elaf*.

Under the title *Turkey and its Democracy* al-Batifi, who, according to his words, lives in Iraq, writes: "Turkey has not achieved anything relating to the problem of the (Kurdish) people with whom the Turkish share their state. Moreover, the Kurdish people in Turkey, which is half of its residents, suffers from poverty, unemployment, ethnic oppression and repression of free thought. And while Erdogan sends support to Somalia and the rest of the African states, victims of earthquakes that struck Van, the Kurdish city, did not merit any support. And worse, the support that was sent to them (from abroad) was stolen on the main streets under the open eyes of the military personnel and the police who did not lift a finger. You, the Turks, were heroes when you killed dozens of young Kurdish men and boys as they smuggled food and fuel to their indigent families, and you did it using American and Israeli drones, until one of the American newspapers revealed this terrible crime. The criminals who committed this terrible crime were not brought to justice, and the hypocritical world who supports you in the West (The U.S.) and the East (Russia, Iran) is clearly your partner. Turkey will have no rest and will not progress in development if the Kurdish people within it does not receive all of its legitimate rights

In another response, under the title *Racism*, Izat writes: “Abdullah Gul speaks about all the problems of the world, but he forgets the problem of a large part of his people, who are the Kurds. He does not relate to this problem at all, despite the armed struggle that arose involving tens (of thousands). This is the Turkish racism that dwells in the hearts of both the nationalists (seculars) and the Islamists (religious) as one.”

Regarding the Kurdish issue, which the President of Turkey elegantly avoided, and relating to which, the respondents quoted above hold up a mirror to his face, it is fitting that the State of Israel do some soul searching. Israeli weapons that have been sold to Turkey for many years served the regime in its war against the Kurds, and in Israel they were well aware of this. It is right that the PKK organization is defined as a terror group, and it is right that the violent struggle that it conducted in the streets of Turkey and its mountains perhaps justified this definition, and despite the fact that Israel has a parallel problem with the Palestinians, and Kurdish success in freeing itself from the Turkish yoke of oppression would perhaps encourage the Palestinian struggle against, still it is appropriate for Israel to raise the ethical question of whether the price that Turkey has paid – and perhaps is still paying – for Israeli weapons is worth the pangs of conscience for supporting the oppression of the Kurds.

I do not claim that Israel must supply weapons to the Kurds, which might encourage them to start a general rebellion that perhaps they will succeed in. However, it is appropriate to consider the ethical issue regarding Turkey, the regional power, concerning questions that involve oppression of the Kurds today as well as with the slaughter of the Armenians in the past. I am not a fan of Yossi Sarid, and I do not share his opinions, but his demand to include the Armenian genocide in the Israeli curriculum - when he was Minister of Education during the Yitzhak Rabin government after 1992 - still echoes in my ears. He was silenced then in the name of “interests”, but I felt that he was right. We can support the Kurds, for example, by filing suits in the international courts against the Turkish officers about the way they treat the Kurdish population in Turkey and in Iraq. We can teach Turkey one of the rules of proper behaviour: “He who lives in a glass house should not throw stones”.

Turkey, no doubt, is an important regional power, and Israel must weigh its steps carefully when dealing with it, because of the changes that are occurring in the region and in light of the unsolved difficulties with Turkey – the flotilla two years ago and the gas in the future. The support that Turkey gives to the rebellion against Assad puts it in indirect conflict with Iran. But this does not prevent it from placing NATO's missile system to protect Europe from Iranian ballistic missiles in its territory. Turkey can play an important role in the Iranian issue, not from “love of Mordechai [Israel]” but rather out of “hatred for Haman [Iran]”...

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