

COMMENTARY

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Turkey: Opportunities and Risk Ahead

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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Washington on 16 May 2013 comes at a pivotal time when the Middle East is riddled with extraordinary conflicts that have the potential of exploding into a regional war. The time is also ripe for creating a geopolitical realignment that could eventually usher in stability and progress.

Turkey can and in fact should play a constructive role, provided that the Erdogan government takes a hard look at what the opportunities are to contribute to building a structure of peace and stability. The Erdogan government, however, should also consider the risks entailed should it remain stuck in grandiose old thinking.

The Turkish government managed over the past few years to create the perception that Turkey's rise has been based on a sound foreign policy doctrine of "zero problems with neighbours" along with solid economic development policies, while continuing social and political reforms consistent with Islamic values.

A close look at the reality, however, suggests a somewhat different picture that raises serious concerns among Turkey's friends and quiet jubilation among its enemies.

According to the Human Rights Watch 2011 World Report, the government increasingly breaches what it has committed itself to, including unjustified prosecutions for alleged speech crimes, the arbitrary use of terrorism laws, prolonged pre-trial detention (especially of journalists and editors), and the systematic intimidation of any individual or party that objects to, or opposes, government policy.

The government also reversed course with the Kurds, committing a clampdown on the legal pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), arresting Kurdish notables and intellectuals for links with the PKK, and until recently returned to the old policy of massive retaliations against PKK attacks.

On Turkish foreign policy, if one takes a look at the situation country by country, the picture looks surprisingly different than “zero problems with neighbours.” There is hardly any neighbouring country with which Turkey does not have some kind of problem.

Now is the time for Ankara to take some corrective domestic and foreign policy measures consistent with what the country has and continues to aspire for but fails to realize.

As the Turkish Parliament is writing a new constitution, there is no better time to seek political equilibrium and enshrine human rights in all aspects, especially the rights of the Kurds. Now that the PKK has agreed to abandon violent resistance in favour of a negotiated settlement, the government can institutionalize such reforms without losing face.

The Kurds and other minorities should enjoy equal rights to speak their language and live their culture with no reservations or discrimination, which is the essence of democratic governance.

Turkey’s failure to reconcile the hundred-year old dispute over the Armenian genocide continues to poison its relations not only with Armenia but also with the United States, which takes a strong supportive position on the Armenian grievances.

It is time to end the conflict with Armenia as the one hundredth anniversary is near (2014) and is bound to reignite a major controversy in and outside Turkey. Instead of taking such a categorical stance refuting the entire the issue of the Armenian genocide, Turkish leaders should take heed of what the Old Testament and the Quran preach: “The children should not be held responsible for the sins of their fathers.”

Turkey, in this regard, should express deep regrets about the Armenian genocide during World War I for the tragic events that occurred a century ago. This may not go far enough with the Armenians, but it offers a good beginning that may lead to reconciliation.

The discord with Greece over Cyprus has only worsened with the dispute over gas exploration near Turkish territorial waters. Turkey must find a solution to the Cyprus conflict; not doing so will further strain its relations with Greece. Real politik must trump nationalism which can serve national interests; otherwise it will only harden over time and further limit any room for a negotiated settlement.

Although Turkey and Iran enjoy strong trade relations, Ankara still has not made up its mind about Tehran’s ambition to acquire nuclear weapons. Their bilateral relations are strained by Ankara’s decision to host a base for a NATO missile defence system and the conflict over Syria’s future.

Moreover, Turkey must come to terms with the fact that Tehran’s and Ankara’s national interests do not coincide and in fact, the two countries are on a collision course. Syria has become the battleground between Sunnis and Shiites and thus the emerging political order in post-Assad Syria will have a great impact on their overall ambitions.

Turkey is also in conflict with the two countries it once acted between as a mediator—Syria and Israel. Erdogan's government has finally lost hope in the Assad regime, and joined its allies in imposing sanctions against it, but refrained from taking any decisive measure of its own, fearing Moscow's wrath. Given the deep animosity and factionalism, the recent agreement between Washington and Moscow to arrange for a conference between the rebels and the Assad government in an effort to end the bloody conflict is not likely to succeed.

But since Turkey will be affected perhaps the most, regardless of the outcome of this conference, it is time for Erdogan to shed its concerns about Russia and persuade the US to plan on supplying the rebels with the weapons desperately needed to tip the balance in their favour and bring a quicker end to the slaughter of civilians.

On the Israeli front, Turkey must put behind its conflict with Israel over the sad Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010 that ended with the killing of nine Turks by Israeli commandos aboard the ship.

Israel should have apologized immediately after the incident for the tragic deaths of the Turks, but Israel's refusal should not have prompted Turkey to downgrade its diplomatic relations with Israel to the lowest level, which clearly did not serve Turkey's long-term strategic interests.

Now that Israel has apologized, however, Turkey should move quickly to restore full diplomatic relations with Israel and certainly not make it contingent upon the removal of the blockade of Gaza.

Turkey must spare no effort to demonstrate even-handedness in dealing with Hamas and Israel. Erdogan's pending visit to Gaza offers a momentous opportunity to persuade Hamas to permanently forsake violence in favour of a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Only then would lifting the blockade become a real possibility, provided it is done to the full satisfaction of Israel's national security concerns. In addition, Erdogan must also use his considerable influence to wean Hamas off of Tehran, which will over time make it more palatable for Israel to deal with Hamas.

To improve the chances of reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, Erdogan must not skip the West Bank and meet with Mahmoud Abbas during his visit to the area if he really wishes to play a constructive role.

Finally, Turkey should recognize that its ultimate successes and its efforts to mitigate Russia's coercive regional policies depend on the strength of its alliance with the United States and on its ability to continue to serve as a positive bridge between East and West.

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the founding of the modern Republic of Turkey by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. In celebrating the birth of the new republic, there is no better time to take a deeper look at what has taken place since then, especially during the past ten years.

I believe that Turkey is a country that has the potential of becoming a significant global player, but, like any other power, it must also learn its limits.

Turkey's current rise to prominence was possible because of its promise and implementation of many political, economic and social reforms. These initial successes, however, are not self-perpetuating and must continuously be nurtured.

Only then will Turkey live up to the promise of being the leading Islamic democracy it has set out to be, or it will lose a historic chance to become that kind of a model, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/turkey-opportunities-and-risks-ahead/>

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