

# Turkey – Europe’s Bridge to the Middle East

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The main assumption of this article is that Turkey is emerging as an important diplomatic player in the Islamic world, particularly in the Arab Middle East. After decades of passivity, Turkey has rediscovered its Middle Eastern surroundings and has now, at least in the strategic sense, become part of it. This has enhanced its ability to act as a political and geographical bridge between Europe and the Arab states and as a regional “source of inspiration” for political reforms in the Arab-Muslim countries, as Abdullah Gül, former minister of foreign affairs and current president of the Republic of Turkey, observed.

This role is based on Turkey’s willingness to act as a regional power, its increasing success in reforming its political system, and a demonstrated ability to resolve the leading challenge for the modernization of Muslim societies, namely the political integration of Islam. There are a variety of reasons for the shift in Turkish foreign policy toward greater and more constructive activism in the Middle East. First and foremost, it is a response to structural changes in Turkey’s security environment since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. That event brought about a marked improvement in Turkey’s relations with Syria and Iran. These developments have coincided with, and to some extent have been reinforced by, important domestic changes in Turkish society: The strictly pro-Western foreign policy elite is being replaced by a more conservative, more religious elite, which has less fear of contact with its Muslim surroundings and Ottoman past.

If managed properly (seeing the changes in Turkey as a “window of opportunity” rather than demonizing them), it could be an opportunity for Turkey’s Western allies, including Israel, to use the country as a “bridge” and to take advantage of its potential as a regional soft power.

The idea behind soft power is that a state focuses on its ability to attain its objectives through attraction rather than coercion—attempting to indirectly influence the behavior or interests of other states through attraction by cultural or ideological means. This is a crucial tactic in an era when relations between the West and the Arab-Muslim world have grown increasingly tense.

### **The New Domestic and Regional Context of Turkey's Middle East Policy**

The predominant preoccupation of Turkey's traditional policy toward the Middle East was and remains the Kurdish issue. Due to the continued fear of disintegration of Turkey's established state elite (resulting from its concerns about threats to the unitary character of the state), the country evaluates its bilateral relations through the lens of internal security concerns. As a result, during the 1990s Turkey's regional policy became hostage to the Kurdish issue, resulting in growing military ties with Israel to counterbalance the perceived threats and growing tensions with Syria and Iran, which supported the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* [Kurdistan Workers' Party] (PKK) in that decade. With the US invasion of Iraq and the growing autonomy of the Kurds in the northern part of that country, as well as the resurgence of PKK activities in Anatolia since 2004, the fear of disintegration was revived. On the other side, Syria and Iran reevaluated their relationship with Turkey after the US invasion and took a friendlier stance. This was due to the new geopolitical realities and their overlapping concerns about the establishment of an independent Kurdish state at their borders.<sup>1</sup> Parallel to the improvement in the relationship between Turkey, Syria and Iran, relations with Israel became chillier: While during the 1990s both countries had common strategic views and perceptions of regional threats, the war in Iraq revealed a major divergence between both strategic partners due to Ankara's suspicion of Israel's alleged support for the state-building efforts of Iraqi Kurds. Significantly, the Turkish-Israeli relationship had been rooted almost exclusively in military ties.

Compared to these challenges in the immediate neighborhood, changes on the domestic scene were arguably even more significant to Turkey's foreign and security policy. The process of "Europeanization," the transformation of the Turkish economy and the ongoing democratization of Turkey's society have become leading vehicles for enabling "anti-systemic" elites to emerge on the political and economic landscape, outside the traditional Kemalist state circles. This "new Anatolian elite" is "comfortable with its Islamic heritage while striving to be modern, technologically oriented, and part of the European system as long that does not mean a total loss of Islamic identity."<sup>2</sup> The new elite bases its ideology on the acceptance of secularism and views religion as a private matter, emphasizing the compatibility of the devout practice of Islam and a secular lifestyle. The net

result has been that the traditional state elite no longer enjoys a monopoly in the political and economic arena. The highly exclusive and insulated circle of foreign policy analysts of the state elite has dissolved, and the foreign and security policy debates have become more pluralistic.

### **What Does This Mean for Turkey's Regional Role?**

The debates on Turkey's role as a "model" gained momentum through Western initiatives to democratize the Middle East, in particular after 9/11. The United States, especially, began to promote Turkey as a model which should be imitated by developing Muslim countries. Others argued that Turkey's experience is an inappropriate example of democratization in the Islamic world because of the historical and socioeconomic uniqueness of every country. But before considering the possibility of using Turkey as a model, the debates should focus on the question of whether the country has the credibility, political will and the acceptance within the Muslim world to project itself as a "source of inspiration," meaning, to act as a regional soft power.

Traditionally, Turkey avoided involvement in Middle Eastern politics. At most, Turkey pursued a low profile with regard to confidence-building measures. This tradition seems to be changing, however, as the present government seeks a higher regional profile for Turkey. These efforts are accompanied by a display of greater self-confidence, which has come with the recognition that Turkey carries more prestige and acceptance in the Arab world, especially among the Islamic movements seeking to distance themselves from violence and integrate into the existing political systems.

The domestic reforms that the current government has succeeded in implementing, accompanied by the enhanced prospects on Turkey's membership in the EU, are crucial factors that contribute to the government's credibility in the Arab and Muslim world. A further measure of credibility is the fact that it is a government led by a political party which has its roots in political Islam, and is able to demonstrate that Islam and democracy can coexist. The ability of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi [Justice and Development Party] (AKP) to emphasize democratic pluralism and the need for reforms without putting into question the basic values of secularism has been central to its success and credibility. This is a decided advantage that the current AKP government enjoys in the Muslim world, as opposed to the traditional perception of Turkey as a traitor to the Muslim world and a country under the control of a hardline secularist, militarist regime.

The developments since the rise to power of the AKP government in November 2002 are changing the perceptions of Turkey in the Arab world. The improved relations with the Arab world have not been brought about at the expense of relations with other countries, such as Israel. In fact, at the end of the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium, the two countries diversified their relationship—aside from the security sector, enhanced relations in the political, economic and scientific sector could be observed. This occurred despite the heightened tensions between Israel and Turkey that arose from their divergent security concerns.

The aforementioned “change of heart in the Arab world” toward Turkey was expressed at several meetings of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Arab League, where Turkey gained the status of a permanent guest. High-level representatives of Turkey, such as then minister of foreign affairs Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, declared democratization a foreign policy objective and stressed the need for Muslim countries “to put their houses in order.”<sup>3</sup> It was the first time in the history of the Turkish republic that Ankara attempted to position itself as a “model” for other Muslim countries with some credibility. The fact that these calls came from a political party with Islamist roots made this transformation even more significant. The changed image of Turkey led to the election of Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu as secretary-general of the OIC in June 2004, which carried further symbolic value.

The developments in Turkey’s relations with the Arab Middle East can be partly attributed to Turkey’s success on its path towards full EU membership. Greater numbers of Arab officials have begun to think in more pragmatic terms and consider Turkey’s relations with the EU as a positive event, with respect to their own economic and political development. Most of the Arab media present Turkey’s efforts for EU membership as a test case of whether Europe will be able to uphold the liberal values it advocates. There were also those who argued that a Turkey advancing toward EU membership would demonstrate that democracy and modernity can coexist with Islam and that it would be possible to learn from Turkey’s development. All in all, the three important Arab political movements—the Arab left, the mainstream Arab Islamists, and the Arab nationalists—which traditionally have condemned Turkey for a variety of reasons now have come around to new and different thinking on modern Turkey. Therefore, it is interesting to note that the director of the influential newspaper *Al-Abram Weekly* argued that Turkey’s bid for EU membership would increase the prospects of dialogue between the Muslim and the Western world and that Turkey’s transformation could serve as a model for transforming the Middle East.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Turkey's positive prospects, one should preach caution. The reasons range from the fact that the transformation of Turkey is not yet consolidated to the fact that Turkey is very much a *sui generis* case because of the incentive of EU membership it enjoys, compared to its Muslim neighbors. Democratization and transformation—two main characteristics of the Turkish experience—have indeed come a very long way in Turkey over the last decades. They are the result of a very slow, long and often painful process of modernization and secularization of politics and law. But Turkey is still far from having achieved the appropriate balance between secularism and freedom of religious expression, as recent discussions about the ban of headscarves at universities and public institutions demonstrate. Turkey still needs a consolidation process. In this process, the EU anchor is crucial to keep Turkey on the transformation track. This also explains why some in Turkey have become uncomfortable with the idea of their country being presented as a model for the Islamic world. Their main concern is that presenting Turkey as a model for the Middle East or Islamic countries could jeopardize Turkey's European aspiration and could result in an undesirable "Middle-Easternization" of the country.

Nevertheless, for Turkey, the success in "putting its house in order" and advancing on its path toward EU membership has created self-confidence in regional and international politics. In many ways, this newfound self-confidence was a driving factor in the AKP's aspiration to become a regional soft power. The government advanced a policy which intended to transform Turkey into a "regional bridge" that could facilitate dialogue between the Western world and the Middle East. This vision has been articulated by Ahmed Davutoglu, chief foreign policy adviser to the prime minister. He has argued that the political development, economic capabilities, dynamic social forces and the ability to reconcile Islam and democracy are features that afford Turkey the possibility of developing and implementing such policies.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, as long as Turkey's democratization and transformation continues successfully, Turkey can position itself as a concrete point of reference for the benefits that a democratic and market economy provides in terms of stability, relative prosperity and security. It can be expected that the benefits of Turkish economic growth will spill over into the adjacent regions. Growing interaction in business will help to enhance existing contacts and bring about the development of new channels of communication, mutual interests and interdependencies. All in all, these will constitute the basis of Turkey's soft power, which will bring about major transformations in the region. The sum of these interactions may also contribute to the establishment of a framework within which a dialogue between the West and the Muslim world can fruitfully develop.

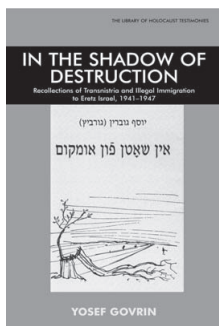
## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Bill Park, *Turkey's Policy towards Northern Iraq: Problems and Perspectives* (London, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> Graham E. Fuller, "Turkey's Strategic Model: Myths and Realities," *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer 2004), 51-64.
- <sup>3</sup> See Meliha Benli Altunısık, "The Turkish Model and Democratization in the Middle East," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, XXVII:1-2 (2005), 45-63.
- <sup>4</sup> See *Al Abram Weekly*, December 23-29, 2004.
- <sup>5</sup> See Ahmet Davutoglu, "Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı," *Radikal*, February 26, 2004.

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