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Turkey's "Soft Power" Strategy: A New Vision for a Multi-Polar World

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ABSTRACT

There is a lively debate centered on whether Turkey is undergoing an axis shift, meaning Turkey is drifting away from the Transatlantic system and heading towards the Middle East in the most acclaimed dailies and journals of the Western world. One may witness a flurry of commentaries, appraisals and op-ed articles published in these media outlets. Taking notice of the vibrant debate on Turkey's orientation in the international sphere, Turkey's leaders underlined Turkey's position with varying degrees of emphasis. Despite the statements of Turkey's policymakers, which argue against the idea of shift of axis, the debates over Turkey's identity and foreign policy orientation has not lost steam. The shift should not be attributed to Turkey's departure from its Western ties to be replaced by those with the East but rather, a shift of power as the inevitable outcome of the end of the Cold War and a fact of the new millennium.



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A Shift of Axis?

The third quarter of the year 2009 witnessed a flurry of commentaries, appraisals and op-ed articles published in the most acclaimed dailies and journals of the Western world on whether Turkey is undergoing an axis shift, meaning Turkey is drifting away from the Transatlantic system and heading towards its turbulent South and East. Here, South is meant to be the Middle East and East is Asia.

In the post-9/11 world where the postulate of late Samuel Huntington, the "clash of civilizations" had become one of the major topics of global intellectual discourse, Turkey's turn towards the East would be a significant tectonic shift over the civilizational fault lines given its indispensable geopolitics. Thus, Turkey's direction becomes a concern for everybody, from West to East, from South to North.

Since the beginning of Fall 2009, not a single day goes by without reading titles and headings like "How the West Lost Turkey," "What Happens If Turkey Leaves the West," "Turkey: An Ally No More," "Turks' Eastern Turn," "The Turkish Temptation," "Turkey's Worrisome Approach to Iran and Israel," "The New Turkish Lexicon," "A NATO Without Turkey," "Is Turkey Iran's Friend?" "An Islamist Pivot to the East," "Disillusioned with Europe, Turkey Looks East," "Turkey and the Middle East - Looking East and South."

These are a few examples of titles of think-tank reports and the headings of op-ed pieces and articles appearing in periodicals and dailies in the West ranging from

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the United States to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. They underscore the prevailing sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic on Turkey's current foreign policy direction. Implicit in all these analyses is a foregone conclusion that Turkey has reoriented itself and is making a historically significant detour away from the West towards its South and East, primarily the Muslim world. With it comes the perception –mainly among the Europeans- that “Neo-Ottomanism” is replacing some of the basic tenets of Republican Turkey. The Western-oriented secular Republican Turkey, which has remained loyal for decades to the principles laid out by its founder Kemal Atatürk, is seen to markedly contrast with the Ottoman Empire that reigned over the Middle East and parts of Eastern Europe for 400 years. Turkey's current foreign policy initiatives are considered to be a revival of the Ottoman vision.

Turkey's foreign policy direction equally and simultaneously raised interest in the region's opinion circles and its media. This has earned Turkey considerable coverage from a starkly different perspective than that of the Western world. Turkey's seemingly new posture is applauded by most of the commentators. “Could This Be Turkey's Century in the Middle East?,” “Turkey Leads the Muslim World,” “Turkey Has A Role to Play,” “Middle East Power Shifting to Turkey and Iran,” “Turkey is Becoming a Regional Broker,” “Turkey Can and Must Mediate in the Region,” “We Need More Erdogans,” “The Rise of Turkey” are a few examples of salutary headlines and titles of articles and op-ed pieces of the Arab and Muslim media on Turkey's emergence as a new power center in the broader Middle East.

Turkey's Multi-Directional Approach: Reaching out to the North, South, East, and West

Taking notice of the vibrant debate on Turkey's orientation in the international sphere, Turkey's leaders, one after the other, underlined Turkey's position with varying degrees of emphasis. In October 2009, the Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan delivered the keynote speech at the Istanbul Forum - a symposium where renowned international experts discussed Turkey's economic and political prospects over the next two decades, ruled out the alleged “axis shift” in Turkey's foreign policy. He said, “There is no axis shift of Turkey. We are standing where we have been standing at the beginning of our political power.” He added that the growing influence of Turkey in its South and East, in its “near abroad,” is actually “taking the burden off the shoulders of the EU.” To counter the arguments by European dissenters to Turkey's integration into the EU on the grounds that including Turkey within the EU's borders would bring the EU in close proximity to the most volatile parts of the world, Erdogan underlined Europe's conspicuous

absence at a crucial juncture of history in a region holding critical Western interest. To the contrary, Erdogan reiterated Turkey's pivotal role for the EU because of its commitment to the EU and its strategic advantage in the region as a resurgent and functional regional power in the Middle East.

On November 4th, the President Abdullah Gül made some critical remarks in his speech at the inauguration ceremony of a Ankara think-tank regarding "those who are recently raising questions according to their perceptions." He took issue with headlines such as "Where Turkey is Heading?" and "Is Turkey Moving to the East?" He said, "Turkey is going to what directions, as if Turkey is a confused country, in the midst of a turbulent sea drifting with the waves." He refuted these perceptions, saying that "Turkey is absolutely not so." He said, "What Turkey is doing is clear. Turkey, surely, is moving simultaneously in every direction, towards East and West, North and South." For Gül, "the important point is to which direction its values are moving." He defined that "direction" as "democratic values, supremacy of law, respect of human rights, transparency, gender equality, and a functioning free market economy." His statement was a veiled reconfirmation of Turkey's EU vocation, however vindicated by the growing Turkish autonomy in foreign policy in terms of its increasing influence in its "near abroad."

Ahmet Davutoğlu, The Minister of Foreign Affairs, is deservedly considered to be the "main architect" of Turkey's new foreign policy. He has taken great pains to define the guiding principle as "zero-problems with neighbors" rather than "Neo-Ottomanism." Because "Neo-Ottomanism" is a throw-back to Turkish sentiments of grandeur and can equally be perceived as expansionism by the regional counterparts of that foreign policy.

Despite the sincerity expressed in those statements of Turkey's policymakers, the debates over Turkey's identity and foreign policy orientation has not lost steam. On the contrary, it is taking on speed and it seems that will be the case for the foreseeable future.

Turkey's Position between Iran and Israel: From Strategic Alliance to Regional Leadership

The outcries on Turkey's orientation in its regional outreach (for some "disorientation") are mainly sparked by observing the changed substance of relationship with Israel, while seemingly courting Iran at a time when the United States and the European NATO allies of Turkey have been trying to corner Iran on its nuclearization program.

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Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's discourse does provide some ammunition to Turkey-bashers in the United States, who were already looking to penalize the Turkish government following the diatribe between Erdogan and Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos in the wake of the war on Gaza as well as for those Europeans looking for legitimate excuses to block Turkey's integration with the EU. The gradual deterioration between Turkey and Israel is attributed mainly to the personal conduct of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan when he displayed his outrage over Israel's Gaza war in Davos in his fiery remarks directed at Peres. Many observers in Turkey, Israel and the United States alike, who did not believe that the Turkish-Israeli connection in the Middle East might irretrievably be damaged, hoped for an inevitable improvement. Turkey's cancellation of Israel's participation in the NATO exercise on Turkish territory, causing the U.S. and Italy to forgo the exercise, proved that the wedge between Turkey and Israel is much deeper than assumed and goes beyond the alleged emotional outbursts of Tayyip Erdogan.

The strong connection that came into being between the two countries, which reached its peak in the 1990's, had been defined as "strategic." However, it was conjunctural and impossible to maintain intact if Turkey would acquire regional power status.

To mend the "strategic alliance," a proposition like "Turkey's ability to lead in the future will depend on its capacity to balance its relations with the powers in its diverse neighborhood –Iran, Syria, Israel, Russia and Greece all being immediate neighbors–without trading one bilateral relation for another"¹ sounds reasonable and benign compared to hostile appraisals emanating from certain American and Israeli sources. However, this proposition falls short of fully grasping the incipient yet substantial new structural power relationship, having global and regional ramifications, in particular on the Middle East. Israel is no more the power it used to be. The July War it waged against the Hezbollah in Lebanon, perceived by Israel as the proxy of Iran in 2006, and the Gaza saga in December 2008, highlighted the limitations of Israeli military might and stripped Israel from any vestiges of moral highground over which it can politically operate. It relegated Israel to merely becoming a regional actor.

This is one reason that the substance of the relationship with a regionally and internationally emergent Turkey cannot remain unchanged given the radical and dramatic changes occurring in the regional and international political landscape.

A passionate Israeli advocate of the Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership was partially right in his following assessment: "In the 1990's, with the end of the Cold War, Kemalist

Turkey looked for partners in the Middle East that could help in meeting growing challenges from Iran, Iraq and Syria. Israel was the perfect choice. It shared Turkey's threat assessment and it was a strong pro-Western with clout in the United States, the new hegemonic power in the world. Moreover, Jerusalem could provide military technology that the West was reluctant to sell to its NATO ally because of Ankara's war against the Kurdish insurgency. Subsequently, relations with Israel bloomed economically, diplomatically and militarily. For Israel, the intimacy with Ankara was second only to its relationship with the United States. Yet, as international circumstances change and national interests are redefined, relations cool and even international divorce happens. While Israel has been consistent in its desire to maintain strong relations with Turkey, an important regional player, Turkey's international and domestic environment has changed, leading to the current tensions between the two countries."²

Geopolitics, as well as a number of other factors, do not allow Turkey and Iran to enjoy a partnership belonging to a common axis.

Such an approach provides much food for thought in order to comprehend the real dimensions of the chasm between Turkey and Israel. In contrast to the venomous discourse of those Islamophobic observers that are in no short supply in the Western world, as well as those who fail to grasp the structural changes that are underway in the international scene and the region. Times have changed; there is a paradigm shift, which has altered the parameters of the Turkey-Israel relationship. It was never strategic and never will be so.

Despite the questions raised claiming that Erdogan is following an appeasement policy vis-a-vis Iran, the nature of Turkey's relations with Iran is no different than that of its relations with Israel. With Iran too, Turkey never had a strategic relationship and will never have one. Historically, Iran and Turkey are two neighboring regional powers with imperial pasts, extending back two millenia. Geopolitics, as well as a number of other factors, do not allow Turkey and Iran to enjoy a partnership belonging to a common axis. The short-lived Baghdad Pact of 1950's and its successor CENTO did not change the basis of this postulate despite the fact that these two countries were joined in a security-oriented alliance.

Nonetheless, such historical and geopolitical phenomena do not preclude the enjoyment of good-neighborly relations and sharing one of the longest standing frontiers going back to 1639. In addition, strong commercial ties are in the best interests of both countries.

2. Efraim Inbar, "Turkey's strategic partnership with Israel jeopardized," The Daily Star, October 28, 2009.

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Turkey also considers integrating Iran into the international system as the most constructive endeavor in achieving global peace. Turkey has the self-confidence to undertake such a challenging mission. Apart from Turkey's perception of itself being the best suited country geographically and culturally to engage with Iran, Turkey also sees Iran's importance in reaching the trade routes of Central Asia as well as its location on energy transit routes for the future. There is a strong inherent national interest in Turkey engaging with Iran. The trade volume between the two countries currently is around 10 billion US dollars and has potential to double, even triple in a short period of time.

Onlookers may be justified, to some extent, in perceiving a gap between Turkey's policy actions and its political discourse on Iran's nuclear file. Nonetheless, nothing should suggest that there is an axis shift or policy reorientation on Turkey's part, summarized as Turkey leaving its alliance with the West in favor of building an axis with its Eastern neighbor. On the contrary, Turkey self-confidently takes on what the 5+1 Group leaves out or cannot deliver. Whether the self-appointed Turkish mission will be able to deliver on Iran's nuclearization issue remains to be seen. Yet, it is by no means divorced from the international effort to reach a peaceful political settlement on this controversy. Turkey's exclusion of Israel from the NATO maneuvers, which were to take place in Central Turkey, was mainly aimed to dampen Israel's war rhetoric against Iran. Especially, given the intentions revealed by some Israeli officials to attack Iran to prevent the realization of its nuclearization program. Letting Israel participate in such a military exercise on Turkish territory would undercut Turkey's engagement with Iran to arrive at a non-military resolution of its nuclearization problem.

Turkey's "Soft Power" Strategy in the Middle East: An Emerging Regional Power

Turkey is the newcomer in the regional strategic equation in the Middle East with much broader ramifications for the region as a whole, including Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as for the entire international system given the pivotal importance of the zone in which Turkey began to offer and extend its "soft power." Turkey, as an emergent new power in the most turbulent zone of international politics, has the potential of undoing the regional equation of the Middle East with two confrontational poles on each end of the region, namely, Iran in the East and Israel on the West.

Turkey, within a week, signed 40 agreements with Syria and 48 with Iraq in October 2009, holding joint sessions with the governments of both. The agreements cover a very wide range of issues, from security to transportation, environment to trade. They

are mainly of an economic and commercial nature, including extending the railroad connections of Europe up to Basra, the mouth of the Gulf and Bahrain and also crossing the Syrian and Jordanian territory until Saudi Arabia's Hijaz region on the Red Sea Coast. Construction of pipelines for transfer of oil and natural gas are among Turkey's ambitious projects for the future.

Turkey's dynamism covers simultaneously the Levant and Mesopotamia of Antiquity, the heartland of the Middle East. What is interesting and important to grasp is that Syria happens to be the main partner for Iran, while Iraq has been exposed mainly to Iranian influence in the wake of the Iraq war. Therefore, Turkey has the potential to dislocate the Iranian sphere of influence through a "soft power" approach, without antagonizing and polarizing its eastern neighbor. Such a huge mission cannot be accomplished by having an exclusive relationship with Israel to the detriment of the remaining regional actors. It can only be performed with a stature of a regional power filling the vacuum left by the demise of Sunni actors like Egypt and Saudi Arabia and, thus, presenting a counterweight to Iran in the region.

Viewing Turkey's emergence as a political and economic power and a diplomatic honest broker in a region left to the political machinations of Iran and Israel in the wake of the war in Iraq as a shift away from its Western alliances (i.e. Israel) towards Muslim countries is a gross mistake of judgement. Labeling this alleged move as a change of orientation propelled by the ideological preferences of the current Turkish government dubbed as "Islamist" or "Neo-Islamist" is in itself an ideologically motivated accusation.

The following points explain the emergence of Turkey in the international arena as an autonomous regional power:

1. The decline or at least the suspension of American influence in the region due to the failures of the United States in Iraq or the widespread regional perception of those.
2. The absence of Europe and/or ineffectiveness of the EU policy in a region considered as its backyard.
3. The destruction of Sunni dominance in Iraq following the war in 2003 which led to drift of power of erstwhile US allies, Egypt and Saudi Arabia regionally, leaving the space open for Shiite Iran's influence.
4. The growing economic power of Turkey leading it to become the 15th largest economy in the world, and the 7th in Europe, which consequently elevate it to be a member of G-20 Group.

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5. Political modernization of Turkey, which is still underway, thanks to the EU anchor that seemingly proved that the Turkish democracy has matured enough to accommodate a government allegedly having Islamist roots. The successful democratic ascension to government of the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) has placed Turkey as a role model for Muslim societies and public opinion in general, and the Arab world in particular. Alternatively, it has also served the international system in the post-9/11 world.

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The following appraisal coming from the region is noteworthy:

“Turkey is the only modern country in the entire Middle East that has integrated with modernity. It has a functional and democratic political system, a productive economy, and has found workable balances between religion and secularism, faith and science, individual and collective identity, nationalism and rule of law, etc. No other country in the region, from Morocco through to Pakistan, has succeeded in this way. Iran, Egypt and other Arab countries are not the future. Turkey might well be. As a large Sunni country with deep historical roots in the region, this could be the beginning of Turkey’s century in the Middle East. A key driver of Turkey’s opening to the east is also economic. With a growing economy that is fast and approaching the one trillion dollar GDP mark, Turkey has urgent needs. It must secure nearby markets for its growing exports and energy to fuel its growth. It has learned from its closeness to the European experiment, that the national interest is profoundly linked with regional stability and large regional markets. Its foreign policy for the last decade has been actively seeking stability and cooperation in all directions.”³

That is, perhaps, what President Abdullah Gül meant when he said, “What Turkey is doing is clear. Turkey, surely, is moving simultaneously in every direction, towards East and West, North, and South.” Turkey’s moving “in every direction, towards East and West, North and South” can also be viewed from a wider and futuristic angle. The shift should not be attributed to Turkey’s departure from its Western ties to be replaced by those with the East but rather, a shift of power as the inevitable outcome of the end of the Cold War and a fact of the new millennium. Men of wisdom have already predicted such a transfer of power from a Eurocentric to an Asiatic, and from an Atlantic to a Pacific based international system.

A rare strategic mind from Europe put it in the following manner:

"That day in November 1989 marked not only the end of the cold war-era, but also the beginning of a new wave of globalization. The real winners of this new world order are the large emerging countries, first and foremost China and India, which increasingly set the pace of global economic and political development. The G8 has been dismissed by history as a club of western industrial nations; its place has been taken by the G20, which conceals the underlying formula of power distribution within the new world order: the G2 (China and the US). All these changes reflect a dramatic transfer of power from West to East, from Europe and America to Asia, which within the next two decades is likely to bring to an end 400 years of Euro-centrism."⁴

Turkey's position on the international and regional scene can be envisaged as beginning to adjust itself for this future world. As long as the Turkish road to integration with the European Union is blocked and Turkey is snubbed by those countries that form the central axis of the EU, the manifested concerns that Turkey is opening in every direction lack legitimacy.

Despite mutual misgivings, Turkey's European Western vocation has not been a variable in its outward reach. It has remained a historical constant. One reason is that Turkey is an heir to the legacy of Eastern Rome. This could explain the wisdom of Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in saying that in order to judge Turkey's foreign policy endeavors, one should try to do a simulation of what the Romans would do if occupying the seat of Turkish decision-makers.

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4. Joschka Fischer, "Winners and Losers of 1989", Guardian, November 7, 2009

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