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Turkey's Transformers

The AKP Sees Big

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In recent years, Turkey has earned kudos from the international community for its economic dynamism, its energetic and confident diplomacy, and its attempts to confront some of its deepest foreign policy problems, such as in northern Iraq and Cyprus. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said that Turkey is one of seven rising powers with which the United States will actively collaborate to resolve global problems. But Turkey has not yet become the global, or even regional, player that its government declares it to be. These days, as always, daunting domestic issues are bedeviling Turkey's progress. Increasingly polarized views about the leadership of the ruling Justice and Development Party (known as the AKP) have undermined the government's ability to spearhead profound political change. Even some of the AKP's traditional supporters have begun to question whether the party will follow through on its goals, including that of getting Turkey to join the European Union.

There are two camps. The first, and largest, group, which includes center-right politicians, liberals, and the religious, fully supports the AKP. It sees the party as fighting the dead hand of the past to free Turkish politics from subjugation by the military and the judiciary. To most AKP supporters, the party is genuinely committed to instituting a much greater measure of democracy and tackling Turkey's most difficult issue: recognizing the democratic rights of its large Kurdish population. According to them, the party is serious about meeting the difficult requirements for EU accession and about launching fresh and constructive diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. And they interpret the widespread claims that the AKP wants to establish a religious state as both fanciful and retrograde.

The other camp is primarily composed of staunch secularists, the military and civilian bureaucratic elites, and various types of nationalists. And they, remembering the AKP's roots in Islamist movements, claim that the party is increasingly contemptuous of its political opposition, authoritarian, interested in destroying the opposition press, and determined to weaken the Turkish military despite the country's unstable neighborhood. These skeptics argue that the party cares mostly about winning the next election and that the

AKP's commitment to the EU's membership requirements is largely a pretext for passing measures that eviscerate the military. To them, as well as to many Turkey watchers, the AKP is making the country more religious, partly in order to consolidate its position in the Muslim world even at the expense of its traditional alliance with the West. The AKP, they charge, has consistently overlooked the appalling behavior of Muslim governments toward their own people even as they have ferociously pointed out other countries' mistreatment of Muslims.

PARTY TIME

Much can be cited to support either view, but the reality of Turkish politics is more complex. The basic question is whether the AKP, by far the country's dominant party, both in terms of power and in terms of popularity, can avoid being held back by its Islamist past and the culturally conservative inclinations of its core constituents.

The AKP's success in achieving rapid economic growth since its first electoral victory, in 2002, won the party vast political support and propelled it to a spectacular reelection victory in July 2007. It was the first time since 1954 that an incumbent in Turkey had increased its share of the vote, and the AKP did so by an astonishing 14 percentage points. The global economic crisis, however, stopped growth in its tracks. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan downplayed the crisis' impact at first and so was slow in stimulating the economy. By the first quarter of 2009, GDP had declined by more than 14 percent since the first quarter of 2008 and unemployment had risen to 15 percent. It now seems that Turkey has survived the worst, but the bloom is off the rose of the Turkish "miracle." The AKP has grown cautious about enacting controversial political reforms, most important, passing a badly needed constitution to replace the one imposed by the military in 1982. Real change is on the chopping block.

Turkey has always been a conservative country, and the vast majority of Turks have traditionally voted for center-right parties. The rise of the AKP represents a struggle between the military and civilian bureaucratic elites -- which have controlled the state and the economy since independence -- and the new, largely provincial and pious middle class. This new bourgeoisie took advantage of the market reforms of the 1980s to build an export-driven industrial base in the backwater of Anatolia. As its wealth grew, it began to challenge the economic elites traditionally favored by the state and its military backers.

And in 2002, the new middle class helped elect the AKP, a party whose piety and relative indifference to the legacy of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish republic, challenged the ideological underpinnings of the Turkish state: secularism, nationalism, and centralization. Since then, the AKP has allowed for more public manifestations of Islam and expressed its attachment to hot-button issues, for example, by supporting the right of women to wear headscarves in universities, which is currently prohibited. More headscarves can be seen today than ten or 20 years ago, and their visibility disturbs the secularist elites. To them, it indicates that the AKP government is indeed using its influence, locally and nationally, to facilitate religious practices. The AKP's attempt to lift the headscarf ban landed the party leadership in front of the Constitutional Court in 2008, when the state prosecutor attempted to have the party banned for challenging the country's secular constitution. The AKP narrowly won that fight, but secularists are convinced that the party is unlikely to mend its ways, and rumors occasionally circulate about another court case being brought to try to finish off the party.

Since coming to power, the AKP has managed to reduce the political influence of the generals. It has pushed through legal changes that limit the military's power over politics. Erdogan brushed aside the military's effort to prevent Abdullah Gül, a leading AKP member, from assuming the presidency in 2007.

Erdogan brought civilians to the National Security Council, which had long been dominated by the military. In July, he spearheaded legislation that subjects active-duty soldiers to review by civilian courts for crimes not related to their military duties. The days of military coups are likely over, partly because the country has become far more diverse and complex and power is now more diffuse, and partly because of these AKP-led reforms.

To be sure, much of this development is also the officers' doing. They have intervened four times since 1960 to depose civilian governments but have resisted change themselves. On civil-military relations and the questions of religion and Kurdish identity, the military has refused to countenance any vision other than its own. It has been wedded to a very strict definition of secularism, for example, and until very recently, it completely rejected even the Kurds' most basic demands for cultural rights. A recent investigation into an extensive secret effort by some officers and civilian leaders to destroy the AKP has been a revelation to many Turks. Although the handling of this so-called Ergenekon inquiry has been criticized, it has already landed many officers, academics, and others in jail. Whatever facts are eventually unearthed, the investigation has already tarnished the military's reputation.

The AKP will live or die by its policies toward the Kurds. So far, it has managed, courageously and skillfully, to modify Turkey's long-standing policy toward the Iraqi Kurds. For years, the Turkish government had treated the quasi-independent Kurdistan Regional Government as a danger to Iraq's unity and an instigator of Kurdish separatism in Turkey. But the AKP has now engaged the Kurdistan Regional Government in an attempt to win the confidence and cooperation of the Iraqi Kurds on a slew of issues, ranging from security to economic exchanges.

On the harder question of how to treat the estimated 12-14 million Kurds who live in Turkey, however, the AKP government has promised much and done little. This issue is now the biggest drag on Turkey's political life, undermining the political and administrative reforms, constraining the country's foreign policy choices, and requiring huge military expenditures to combat the decades-old insurgency led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the Turkish Kurdish rebel group known as the PKK. After years of promising that it would bring a fresh approach to the Kurdish question, the AKP government sparked a charged debate this summer by calling for a "democratic opening" (sometimes referred to as a "Kurdish opening") and launching a series of conversations with Kurdish and Turkish political and civil-society groups. The perspectives of both Turkey's Kurds and influential elements in the AKP appear to be changing, but nothing can be taken for granted. The country is too divided. Many Turkish Kurds still take their cue from Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, whom the Turkish military, most Turks, and most Western governments consider to be a terrorist. Although Erdogan has promised to unveil a new comprehensive policy, as of this writing, no specifics had yet been revealed. Erdogan will probably propose incremental changes allowing the Kurds to express their cultural identity more freely, such as easing the restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language. But this is unlikely to satisfy many Kurds; real reform will require a long-drawn-out process. The most difficult short-term issue is whether to consider granting amnesty to PKK fighters, particularly the group's leaders. How the government handles this question may determine the scope of change possible on the broader Kurdish question. It remains to be seen whether Erdogan has the stamina and the political fortitude to carry out measures to end the PKK's 25-year insurrection that will enable most of the PKK fighters to return home and release the many prisoners associated with the organization without necessarily legitimizing its stance. Nevertheless, Erdogan has opened the door to truly radical change, and this will continue to generate fractious debate and uncertain consequences for Turkey's political stability.

ANKARA'S AMBITIONS

Turkey has never before had a foreign minister with the drive, vigor, and vision of Ahmet Davutoglu. Even before he acceded to the post, last May, Davutoglu had been promoting a forceful vision of Turkey's role in the world. He has gathered an A list of senior officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He has set forth an ambitious policy advocating "zero problems with neighbors," with the hope of settling long-standing differences through a high degree of engagement with the leaders and the peoples of Turkey's neighbors. The aim is to turn Turkey from a "central," or regional, power into a global one in the new international order. Implicitly, this is also a project to demonstrate to the world that a Muslim country can be a constructive democratic member of the international community.

More explicit is Turkey's ambition to better deal with the Muslim nations of the Middle East and beyond, whether friends or foes of the West. The AKP government has been enormously active -- but with mixed results, despite the acclaim it showers on itself. It has been most successful in expanding its trade and investment abroad. It has been far less so in making progress toward satisfying the EU's accession requirements and has failed to come to grips with the question of whether the Ottomans' treatment of the Armenians a century ago constituted a genocide. It is still unclear whether the AKP has the will to break much domestic crockery on matters of foreign policy.

Its major breakthrough so far has been to end Turkey's political isolation of Iraqi Kurdistan. Ankara no longer pretends the region does not exist and that it need only deal with Baghdad. This 180-degree turn was in part prompted by the recent U.S. decision to begin withdrawing its troops from Iraq. Turkey is trying to anticipate the evolution of Iraqi politics in the absence of U.S. combat units in the country. The AKP government wants Iraq to remain whole, but it realizes that if tensions in Iraq devolve into all-out violence and the country breaks apart, Turkey would be better off with a friendly partner in Iraq's energy-rich north. The AKP government managed to convince the Turkish military that an opening to the Iraqi Kurds would not exacerbate existing difficulties with the Turkish Kurds and would increase Turkey's influence in Iraq. The Turks have come to understand that for the Iraqi Kurds, having better relations with Ankara is a strategic choice: Turkey is their door to the West. Yet the Turkish authorities and their Kurdish counterparts in Iraq still have to sort out some explosive issues, such as the contested status of the oil-rich area of Kirkuk. The Turks believe that it is essential to keep the city's control out of the hands of the Kurdistan Regional Government, both to help prevent the breakup of Iraq and to limit the aspirations of the Iraqi Kurds.

The Turkish government also made an impressive move earlier this year when it reversed its long-standing policy of isolating Armenia. In April, despite an apparent promise to U.S. President Barack Obama, Erdogan delayed opening Turkey's border with Armenia after nationalists in Turkey and Azerbaijan protested. But in another surprising about-face, in August, Turkey approved the text of two protocols establishing diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries and an agreement on opening the Turkish-Armenian border. This is a major step forward for diplomacy in the Caucasus. Turkey also hopes that the initiative will help its case with the EU and reduce the pressure on the U.S. Congress to pass a resolution on the Armenian genocide next year. It remains to be seen whether the AKP will stand up to opposition. Erdogan has promised the government of Azerbaijan that Turkey will not open its border with Armenia until Armenia relinquishes control over the regions it holds surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, a landlocked province in Azerbaijan. Erdogan seems to be betting that a diplomatic solution to this issue will somehow be found this fall. But it is quite possible that Erdogan's deals with Armenia will fail to pass in the Turkish parliament because of Azeri and Turkish nationalist pressures.

SORES ON THE SIDE

The issue of Cyprus continues to be the main hurdle to Turkey's accession to the EU. Despite Turkey's renewing negotiations with the two Cypriot parties for the umpteenth time, there is no great hope for settling the island's contested status. The Turkish government will also have to decide soon whether it will open its ports to shipping from the Greek part of Cyprus, as it has pledged it will do to under its agreement with the EU. The European Commission is expected to release a report on Turkey's progress in November, and that could set the stage for recriminations. The fact that in 2003 the Turkish government displayed the courage, at least in domestic political terms, to drop its traditional obstructionist stance in favor of a pro-European one seems to hold little water today. The EU failed to reward the Cypriot Turks for the dramatic change in their patron's policy by providing them with trade opportunities, thereby undermining the AKP government's diplomacy and its credibility on this issue at home. Until its recent Armenian initiative, the Turkish government seemed to have grown mostly inert when it came to enhancing its standing with the EU.

Turkey did score a big win last July by signing an agreement with six other countries to build a pipeline that would bring natural gas from the Caucasus and Central Asia through Turkey to Europe. Whether the Nabucco pipeline will ever be built is uncertain: the costs of construction and whether enough gas will be available to fill the pipeline are issues that still need to be worked out, and the Turkish government will have to maneuver delicately with both the West and Russia. But the pipeline project has already raised Turkey's importance in the eyes of the EU's energy-hungry countries.

Several Turkish foreign policy initiatives have given Western governments pause. One is Turkey's closer relationship with Russia, a rapprochement driven by a vast expansion in Turkish-Russian trade. During a highly publicized visit to Ankara by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin soon after the Nabucco pipeline deal was signed this summer, the Turkish and Russian governments struck a potentially conflicting agreement to develop the South Stream pipeline to bring Russian gas to Europe through Turkish territory. As soon as the Georgian crisis hit in August 2008, Erdogan jumped on a plane and tried to broker negotiations between Moscow and Tbilisi. His intervention, which was notably uncoordinated with Turkey's allies in NATO and the EU, yielded little more than Turkey's call for a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Pact -- an idea that pleased the Russians but appeared to vex Western governments. Whatever suspicions of Russia Turkey may continue to harbor, Erdogan has significantly improved the tenor of the two states' relations. He is also in no hurry to see Georgia's NATO aspirations fulfilled.

Perhaps the AKP government's most ballyhooed effort has been its diplomatic activism in the Middle East. The Turkish government took advantage of the vacuum created by President George W. Bush's unpopular policies in the region to participate in indirect talks between Israel and Syria. It injected itself into the negotiations following the crises in Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009. French President Nicolas Sarkozy invited Davutoglu, then a foreign policy adviser, to join the French delegation that traveled to Damascus to discuss the Gaza crisis. Ankara has taken partial credit for the agreement governing the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq; it reportedly deserves some for hosting talks between U.S. representatives and Iraqi insurgents earlier this year. And Foreign Minister Davutoglu jumped at the opportunity to mediate Iraq and Syria's recent dispute (Iraq claims that bombings in Baghdad's Green Zone in August were carried out by insurgents from Syria).

Supporters of the AKP's new foreign policy argue that Turkey is finally finding its voice in international politics, but this may be weakening its ties with the United States and the EU. These traditional partners are now just one pillar in Turkey's new so-called multidimensional foreign policy. On the other hand, Turkey's diplomatic efforts in its immediate neighborhood often appear to be influence-seeking for its own sake. Aside from its successful brokering in Iraq and its ability to secure a seat in the UN Security Council this

year, Ankara's diplomatic efforts have yielded little, especially in the Middle East. Turkey has become adept at transmitting messages, but such symbolic achievements have far exceeded concrete ones.

Some of the AKP's foreign policy initiatives have also been clumsy and irksome. At the Davos meeting early this year, Erdogan reprimanded Israeli President Shimon Peres, who has spent much effort advocating Turkey's cause with Europe, for Israel's recent military campaign in Gaza. Yet Erdogan apparently has had no problem welcoming Sudan's president, who faces an indictment for war crimes, to Ankara several times since early 2008. When asked whether the extensive killings in Darfur constitute genocide, the Turkish government invokes a cliché about the value of closed-door diplomatic undertakings on sensitive matters. Erdogan was one of only a few leaders, along with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and representatives of Hamas and Hezbollah, to congratulate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on winning Iran's contested presidential election in the spring.

And yet, somewhat incredibly, Erdogan has criticized the Chinese government for committing "almost a genocide" in China's western province of Xinjiang. However reprehensible the Chinese authorities' treatment of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang, the fact is that Turkey, which has been fighting off charges that it committed genocide of its own, against the Armenians, should be careful when it uses such a loaded word. In one of its biggest blunders, the AKP government opposed the appointment of former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen as chief of NATO because he had defended, on free-speech grounds, a Danish newspaper's decision to publish cartoons that offended Muslims. Turkey thereby alienated many Europeans by seeming to favor Muslim sensibilities over liberal democratic values. The Turkish government eventually settled the matter by accepting the appointment of a Turk to the new post of deputy secretary-general for NATO, but the incident so irked French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner that he publicly renounced his support for Turkey's accession to the EU.

None of this is to indict Erdogan or the AKP; it is simply to explain why Turkey's strongest allies view its considerable progress with increasing unease. Turkey used to punch below its weight; now, it seems to be punching above it. This would be an unmitigated advantage for Turkey if the AKP were not so quick to call every one of its foreign policy initiatives a resounding success. Turkish foreign policy officials have even said that by suggesting China had committed genocide against the Uighurs, Erdogan actually increased Ankara's influence with Beijing. The Turkish government has also claimed credit for getting the Syrians out of Lebanon (angering the Americans and the French, who parented a UN Security Council resolution arguing for their exit) and for getting Hamas to accept a cease-fire with Israel (upsetting the Egyptians, who were the primary brokers). The Turkish government now runs the risk of believing its own grandiose rhetoric and of dangerously overreaching. Some also fear that Turkey's leaders might stop being able to divorce the country's foreign policy aims from their own cultural (and perhaps religious) sensibilities. Erdogan and Davutoglu sometimes appear to be conflicted: Do they hope to participate in global politics as practitioners of realpolitik or as representatives of an Islamic culture?

ASPIRING TO GRANDEUR

Erdogan dominates Turkish politics today not only because he is a dynamic leader but also because, as the head of a majority party, he can usually run roughshod over the opposition (the military aside). It helps him that the Turkish opposition is incompetent and that Turkish political parties are often essentially fiefdoms, with individual leaders deciding every issue and appointing every party representative in parliament. But even Erdogan must deliver. Many of the policy changes he has spearheaded will endure, but fractious politics could endanger his legacy. If somehow the AKP lost the next election, for instance, progress on the question of the Turkish Kurds' rights would likely be set back for a long time.

Turkey has become a far more complex country than it once was. Washington should not assume it knows it. The endless rhetoric about the "strategic" closeness between Turkey and the United States cannot substitute for concrete policy. Despite Turkey's Armenian initiative, tensions over the Armenian genocide issue could escalate next year. Ankara's position is getting increasingly difficult to maintain, particularly with a U.S. president who has said repeatedly that he thinks the killings of 1915 amounted to genocide. And as Turkey's economy has become more dynamic over the past decade, the AKP has walked in lockstep with the West less and less. Erdogan is his own man.

The increasing independence of Turkey's foreign policy is reinforced by the population's nativism. A recent poll by a Turkish university showed the Turks' deep mistrust and dislike of foreigners, especially their country's closest allies, the Americans and the Europeans. By very large majorities, they also indicated that they would not want to have atheists, Jews, or Christians for neighbors. A poll on transatlantic trends by the German Marshall Fund released in September suggests that despite their high regard for Obama, the Turks have a more negative image of the United States than do Europeans. Only 22 percent of the Turks polled said that they were positively disposed toward the United States, compared with 74 percent of the western European respondents. And the Turkish government is not doing much to change its citizens' views.

Turkey has problems with the EU, too, partly because of the distance between the EU's and Turkey's conceptions of liberal democracy. This gap might narrow over time, but that will require conviction and effort on the part of Turkey's leaders. Both the government and the opposition have failed to educate themselves or the public about the rule of law. Recent draconian measures against the press are one indication of the country's underlying illiberal penchant. Conversely, Washington and most other democratic governments have always had a tendency to ignore the long-term issues and focus on the immediate. Turkey's relations with Armenia may be the flavor of the day because Obama needs to manage the Armenian American constituency. Focusing on that without also acknowledging the AKP's Kurdish opening -- which offers a chance to transform Turkey in major ways -- would be a terrible mistake. The United States should help the AKP's efforts along by staying out of the reform debate in Turkey and encouraging the demobilization of the PKK in northern Iraq.

The AKP has a unique opportunity to change Turkish society, change the country's constitution and its archaic political system, and make peace with both its neighbors and its own people. It seems ready to seize it. But it needs assistance. The West should not act as if Turkey is moving in the right direction in all respects, but it can help keep Turkey on track to becoming a tolerant liberal democracy. Turkey's leaders, for their part, must not think that they can expand the country's influence without first having a firm footing in the West. Without a successful reform effort, Turkey will continue to be just an aspirant to grandeur.

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