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**IMPLICATIONS OF THE ENHANCED
REGIONAL ACTIVISM OF TURKEY FOR ITS
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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Introduction

The significance of the European Union in Turkish foreign policy today can only be compared to the significance of NATO membership of Turkey during the Cold War. After the Cold War, and especially in the post-9/11 circumstances in the international arena, Turkey's EU membership is a marker of its identity and belonging, just like NATO membership was during the Cold War years. The aim of EU membership was always seen by Turkish policy makers as a part of the greater goal of belonging to the West. After the Cold War, Turkey has felt a certain need to remind its Western belonging to European countries as the former 'East' Europeans lined up for membership of the EU ahead of Turkey. After 9/11, Turkey also asserted that its membership of the EU was important as a matter of building security both for Turkey and the West in general and as a signal of the inclusive nature of the European (Western) ideal.

The AKP Government and a New Turkish Foreign Policy

The AKP government has been comparatively much more proactive than the previous governments in pursuing ambitious foreign policy goals, ranging from the search for a solution in the Cyprus problem to framing of a new relationship with Armenia, although it failed so far on both accounts. Turkey's foreign policy towards the neighbouring countries has changed and evolved to become more 'soft-power' based and cooperation-oriented, instead of being focused on the long-prevailing threat perceptions. It is certain that Turkey has adopted the EU rhetoric of 'good-neighbourly relations' and the aim of 'developing an area of peace and stability'. The eventual policy outcomes - support for a comprehensive resolution of the Cyprus problem even after the Annan Plan referenda, seeking of a rapprochement with Armenia, aiming at resolution of disputes in the Aegean with Greece, and a dialogue oriented policy towards Iran, Iraq and Syria - display the results of a change in behaviour of Turkey in the 'appropriate' direction, hinting at a certain learning process and successful norm internalisation, although a little belatedly, in the post-Cold War era.

Solving the Cyprus Problem

The immediate launch of the talks on the Aegean with Greece after the declaration of Turkey as a candidate country showed that it was easier to initiate the expected policies on some topics than others. Turkey faced no internal discussion as to the need for the resolution of disputes in the Aegean. Rapprochement with Greece after the 1999 earthquakes was real and there was increasing optimism as to the future of relations between Greece and Turkey. The AKP government had in its party programme and its election manifesto the aims of acceding to the EU and the solution of the Cyprus problem.¹ The AKP did not support the 'no-resolution is a

¹ AK Parti. 2001. *Party Programme*, www.belgenet.com/parti/program/ak_1.html also at: www.akparti.org.tr, [accessed: August 16, 2009]; AK Parti. 2002. *Election Campaign Manifesto*. Available at <http://www.belgenet.com/secim/bildirge/akp2002-html>, [accessed: August 16, 2009].

solution' policy of the previous Turkish governments on the Cyprus issue. AKP leaders were somehow able to see that the traditional policy on Cyprus - which had by then become a 'state policy' rather than a 'government policy' - was actually becoming detrimental to Turkey's interests, since it played into the perception that Turkey did not desire an internationally recognised resolution to the problem on the island. In order to reverse this position, any Turkish government that aimed at an eventual accession to the Union had to come to terms with the traditional policy on Cyprus and change it in a way that would both secure the rights of the Turkish Cypriots and help Turkey out of the impasse of securing its interests in Cyprus without endangering its EU membership prospect. The only rational outcome would mean facilitating the unification of the island under conditions favourable to all parties of the dispute.²

The adoption of a whole new policy on Cyprus by the AKP showed that it was easier for a new government to start anew on certain contested issues. The AKP government was quick to accomplish this policy change and influence the Turkish Cypriot leadership for a change of position on talks. It would be false to claim that it was easy for the AKP government to change the decades-long 'state' policy on Cyprus. There was strong opposition from the military in this respect, but as the pressure on Turkey mounted for a united Cyprus to accede to the Union instead of the single accession of the Greek Cypriot part, also the military preferred to keep quiet on its reluctance. It is possible to see in this instance the re-definition of the 'national interest'. However, the change of policy rests on a certain calculation of the costs and benefits of alternative policy options, rather than upholding of a certain preference for the unification of the island. The consequent policy shift in Turkey on the Cyprus issue is not to be taken for good. It can be reversed in time, if the policy change does not produce the results it is expected to, which is to facilitate Turkey's accession process to the EU.

² M. Fırat 2009. AKP Hükümetinin Kıbrıs Politikası [Cyprus Policy of AKP Government], in *AKP Kitabı: Bir Dönüşümün Bilançosu* [the AKP Book: the Balance Sheet of a Transformation], edited by I. Uzel, B. Duru, Ankara, (Phoenix), pp. 439-60.

Improving Relations with Armenia

Another major foreign policy issue that the AKP government tried to tackle was the improvement of relations with Armenia, the opening of the closed border and the establishment of diplomatic relations. The government saw that Turkey actually had a lot to gain by changing its policy towards Armenia, which was not proving adequate to force the Armenians on the withdrawal of their troops from Azerbaijani territories, but instead was impoverishing both Eastern Anatolia and Armenia. Trade in Eastern Anatolia could flourish if the border was opened and help in the further stabilisation of the region. However, as soon as the protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations and opening of the border with Armenia were signed, the nationalist circles succeeded in turning the debate into one about selling out Azerbaijan for the sake of international approval. The protocols did not envisage a certain shift of policy for Turkey to deal with the issue of increased international recognition of the 'Armenian genocide', but it established a basis for future dialogue between Turks and Armenians. Despite the domestic and international support the AKP government received for the signing of the protocols, it was not in a position to bring the protocols for ratification to the Parliament since the AKP leaders linked the issue to a preliminary improvement in the talks between the Azerbaijan and Armenia on the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. The government failed to uphold its own cause and fell hostage to the policies of Azerbaijan for the future of its relationship with a neighbouring country. Whatever the reasons of the failure, they point to a certain miscalculation of the government of its strengths and weaknesses. Turkey's shift of policy on Armenia oscillates between a more 'appropriate' position in European eyes and that of a reflection of the realist understanding of international politics. The signing of the protocols marked the major shift of policy preference in favour of opening up the diplomatic channels to Armenia. It was a certain step to meet the demands of the EU institutions for the opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia, and to avoid the US pressure for the recognition of the 'Armenian genocide'. But as soon as these steps were made public, there was a nationalist

backlash from the opposition parties that proved to be rather influential on the government. The government hesitated between performing the expected 'appropriate behaviour' by going to the Parliament for ratification of the protocols, and returning to the nationalist rhetoric against Armenia and displaying solidarity with Azerbaijan due to kinship and also interests in gas and oil supplies.

Setting Prestigious Foreign Policy Goals

An accompanying change in Turkish foreign policy has been in the increasing self-confidence of the government with respect to setting prestigious goals for its foreign policy. The attainment of a temporary seat at the UN Security Council has clearly been a foreign policy success of the AKP government, since it was previously believed that without a solution of Turkey's problematic foreign relations, such a support for Turkey at the UN was unachievable. The appointment of a Turkish citizen as the Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) was one of the first declared foreign policy goals of the AKP and was prone to raise questions as to the change of preferences of the new government regarding foreign policy.

When compared with the 1990s, Turkey, in the first decade of 2000s, has become much more solution-oriented in its foreign policy issues and aimed at building a zone of peace and stability in its neighbouring regions. However, can all this change be attributed to the EU candidacy? It would be fair to claim that the triggering force of change was the EU candidacy. It gained ground even before Turkey was declared a candidate country. The dual nature of Turkey's identity: belonging both to the East and to the West, was not only a slogan of the AKP leadership but also the motto of the foreign policy pursued by Ismail Cem, who was the Foreign Minister from the Democratic Left Party between 1997 and 2002. The change in foreign policy started with Ismail Cem as the foreign minister in 1997, who initiated a dialogue with Syria in the course of the ousting of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from the country in 1998 and built a strong personal friendship with the Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou. This change was supported and sustained with the ensuing candidate status of Turkey to the EU.

Declaring Turkey a candidate country in the new enlargement wave of the EU was important to assert the continuation of Turkey's belonging to the West after the Cold War. However, the coalition government under Bülent Ecevit between 1999 and 2002 that succeeded in achieving the candidate status for Turkey experienced quite a lot of difficulty in meeting the Copenhagen criteria, which were actually the new definition of what the West or Europe signified after the Cold War. In the post-Cold War era, the West did not only mean 'democracy' but rather 'liberal democracy'. Despite the fact that Turkey was considered a 'democracy' during the Cold War years, whether it was 'liberal' was the big question that the EU faced while making up its mind about Turkish accession.

Thus, the EU accession process is one of political liberalisation for Turkey, and resulted in discussions on whether Turkey really wanted to become a member of the EU and whether the government actually had a sustainable will to go through the required reform processes in the way of political liberalisation. The acceptance of Turkey's western identity in the West is linked with Turkey's incorporation of the values of liberal democracy, first and foremost human rights and the rule of law as well as the promotion of peace and stability in its neighbourhood. Putting aside the religious definition of the West in terms of Judeo-Christianity, it is of utmost importance in determining Turkey's identity that Turkey shares in these values. The former Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, stated in his congratulatory message on the occasion of Turkey's election for a temporary seat at the UN Security Council that it would be a big gain for Europe if Turkey promoted these shared values in the international arena.³ Whether it is possible to evaluate Turkey's term in the UN Security Council as such will be discussed further in the following pages of this paper.

³ Uranyum Zirvesi [Uranium Summit], *Milliyet* (Turkish daily), November 10, 2009. Available at: <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/uranyum--font-color--red--pazarligi--font-/guncel/haberdetayarsiv/12.02.2010/1160123/default.htm?ver=33> [accessed at November 10, 2009].

The Values in Turkish Foreign Policy and the Discussion on the Shift of Axis

The changes in the substance of Turkish foreign policy took some time to flourish due to two reasons. First, a certain amount of time was needed for the change in domestic politics to be reflected onto foreign policy. The declaration of Turkey as a candidate to the EU signalled that if it was ever to succeed in its EU path, many things in the domestic politics and the foreign policy of Turkey were to change. The change in the power disposition between the civilian and the military actors in the making of foreign policy, as well as the strengthening of civil society in this respect, was definitely EU induced. There is also a growing awareness on the side of the Turkish military that the government is to bear the political responsibility of the decisions concerning foreign policy. Second, a significant amount of that change resulted from the world-perception of the new single-party government of AKP, which needed to prove itself worthy of governing the country, despite the quite strong domestic scepticism about its undisclosed - i.e. Islamist - policy aims. Thus the new government held onto the EU accession aim.

The current foreign policy of Turkey, as explained by the Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, is based on the historical ties of Turkey with its surrounding region and aims at a zero-problem with neighbours. The AKP's preference for keeping up to the EU accession aim and promoting relations with the Middle Eastern countries based on the conceptual premises of the 'strategic depth' doctrine prove to be, in practice, the continuation of foreign policy á la Ismail Cem that stressed Turkey's dual identity and belonging in both Europe and the Middle East. Nevertheless, some of the change in foreign policy is the result of a certain inclination of the AKP government to develop ties with Islamic countries, and especially with those in the Middle East, sometimes at the expense of severing ties with Israel. This new activism in relations with Arab countries eventually brought about questions about a 'shift of axis' in Turkish foreign policy due to certain doubts in both domestic and foreign circles concerning the pro-Islamist background of the party leaders.

A Shift of Axis in the UN Security Council?

The latest discussions on the shift of axis of Turkish foreign policy are closely linked with the performance of Turkey at the UN Security Council. The debate had already started with Ömer Taşpınar and Philip Gordon's work on 'Winning Turkey'⁴ that emphasised the rising nationalism and xenophobia in Turkey. It was actually a result of the disenchantment with the unilateralist policies of the George W. Bush administration in the Middle East that disregarded the rising terrorist activities that stemmed from Northern Iraq and targeted Turkey. This resulted in the loss of trust of Turkey in its once closest ally. At the same time, Turkey's distancing itself from the EU was seemingly a result of the stalling of accession negotiations due to the Cyprus problem but was actually a result of the policies of France and Germany that favoured a privileged partnership short of full membership for Turkey. The simultaneous distancing of Turkey from both the US and the EU raised suspicions about the loss of Turkey for the West. On the other hand, when compared with the unilateralist policies of the US that were mainly disrespectful of international organisations, Turkey's new policies of zero-problems with its neighbours made Turkey seem much more civilised and European.

The incoming Obama administration has started a process of reconciliation with Turkey as it did with the rest of Europe. At the same time, the principles upheld by the Obama administration can be expected to prevent Turkey from acquiring a tendency to pursue unilateralist policies in its foreign relations as could have been inspired by the former US administration. It can even be expected that Turkey will give a more serious thought to becoming a party to the International Criminal Court or becoming more involved in the prevention of climate change in the pre-accession process.

⁴ P. Gordon and Ö. Taşpınar, *Winning Turkey: How America, Europe and Turkey can Revive A Fading Partnership*, Washington DC, (Brookings Institution Press), 2008; P. Gordon and Ö. Taşpınar, "Turkey on the Brink", *The Washington Quarterly*, 2006, No. 29 (3), pp. 57-70.

Turkey, Iran, Israel

Turkey's latest policies toward Iran and Israel bring about many questions as to what Turkey is doing after all these achievements in its foreign policy. The 'no' vote by Turkey against further sanctions towards Iran at the UN Security Council or its stance in the Israeli-Palestine conflict do not result from the wrong policies pursued by the US or the EU. However, it has strengthened the question about what the West has done wrong in its policy towards Turkey.

With respect to the sanctions against Iran, it is possible to say that Turkey perceived more threat from a future US intervention in Iran than from a prospective nuclear Iran. Turkey's 'no' vote against sanctions towards Iran has not resulted in a domestic criticism of the government's policy. None of the political parties in Turkey define Iran as an enemy or its nuclear capabilities as a threat, despite the fact that Iran was a major source of threat perception in the 1990s due to its aims of regime exportation to Turkey. All political parties, on the other hand, agree that a US intervention in Iran or the intensification of the conflict between Iran and the West is a major source of instability in Turkey's vicinity. At least part of this perception is induced by the fact that despite all previous intelligence reports, no WMDs were found in Iraq, but the country ended up in unreparable turmoil after the US intervention. Turkish policy makers may also be questioning the ability of Iran's nuclear programme, despite the latter's strong wish to be able to acquire nuclear technology capable of producing nuclear weapons. Apart from this perception, calling President Ahmadinejat 'a friend'⁵ may be an act attributable only to the personal feelings of AKP leaders which have definitely played into the perceptions of a shift of axis in Turkish foreign policy. On the other hand, the incessant efforts of Turkey as a member of the UN Security Council to reconcile Western fears of Iran and the finding of a solution to the problem of Iran's nuclear capabilities is actually an act of search for peace and stability, which is one of the major aims of the EU in

⁵ Erdoğan Ahmedinejat ile Görüştü [Erdoğan met with Ahmadinejat], *Ntvmsnbc*, 27 October 2009, Available at. <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25014757/> [accessed February 12, 2010]

the international arena as well. For these reasons, Turkey's 'no' vote in the UN Security Council against further sanctions right after concluding a swap deal with Iran should be seen as part of a strategy to preserve the ability to negotiate with Iran in the future.

Another incident to contribute to debates about the shift of axis of Turkish foreign policy is its deteriorating relations with Israel and the growing importance of the Palestine problem in Turkey's policy towards the Middle East. The policies of Israel in the last decade have caused a deep resentment in Turkish public opinion and have previously resulted in similar exclamations by the former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit on "commitment of a genocide by Israel". Thus, the AKP is not the only government in Turkey to react against Israeli policies. While there is a big international concern about the nuclear capabilities of Iran, the nuclear weapons capacity of Israel to go undisputed is not only a sign of Western hypocrisy in the eyes of the Middle Eastern peoples, but also in contradiction with the EU's Barcelona Process that foresaw a Middle East zone free of WMDs. The mentioning of this fact by the AKP government and the consistency of the arguments of the government aimed at questioning the unconditional support that Israel enjoyed in the international arena. Such a policy based on principles and consistency of arguments rather than one favouring the usage of hard-power and complying with existing power relations is actually quite a change of behaviour in Turkish foreign policy.

Conclusion: Determinants of the Future

In December 2009, Turkey completed its 10th year as a candidate country without a certain timeline for eventual membership. There are many problems ahead for Turkey's accession to the Union and not all of them stem from Turkey. The EU itself seems to be rather undecided about what it wants to do regarding its relationship with Turkey. Under such circumstances it is unfortunately quite a valid question to ask whether the changes towards a soft-power based Turkish foreign policy are sustainable. The future determinants of Turkish foreign policy rest on two major pillars. One of them is definitely the EU and the future (and the nature) of the

relationship between Turkey and the EU. The second pillar is the US. What the US upholds in its global foreign policy and its policy towards Turkey is the other determinant of the future Turkish foreign policy. As the US policy became more unilateral and less concerned over the protection of human rights, Turkey amazingly found itself to uphold these values, rather than following the US example. As the new Democratic administration in the US aims to re-gain the upper-hand in the international promotion of values, such as democracy, protection of human rights and international law, Turkey may feel the need to abide by them even more strongly, especially when the US administration considers Turkey as belonging to the West rather than to the Middle East, which was the case during the previous administration that labelled Turkey as a moderate Muslim country.

Turkey's relations with the Middle East seem to be the most enhanced during the almost eight years of AKP government from November 2002 until August 2010. It is for certain that Turkey does not perceive the same amount of threat from the region as it used to in the 1990s, despite the increase in the instability of the region after the US intervention in Iraq in 2003. The parliamentary decision in March 2003 for Turkey not to cooperate with the US on its intervention in Iraq had seemed like the ultimate convergence of Turkish foreign policy with that of France and Germany and was hailed as being more European than that of the Eastern European countries, which were keen on supporting the US and were also just on the brink of acceding to the Union. However, it should be kept in mind that the outcome of the parliamentary vote was not the primary intention of the Turkish government and that the government's proposal had actually lost the parliamentary vote. The outcome was mainly the result of the doubts and insecurities of the public opinion that could soundly reflect itself on the parliament's decision. Turkey's preference for a diplomatic solution to the crisis on Iran's nuclear capabilities is also to be seen in this respect, which is the unwillingness of the public to see war being waged on another neighbouring country. It is also crucial to note that whatever the perils of Iran's nuclear capabilities, none of the parties in the parliament mention it as a matter of concern or insecurity for Turkey. Surprisingly, Turkey that perceived a fundamental threat from the Islamist regime in Iran in 1990s, does not perceive the

same danger from the increased weapon capabilities of this regime. One possible point of view can be to see it as a major policy choice of AKP. However, all parties in Parliament seem to converge on the non-desirability of an international intervention in Iran on top of the experience of Iraq.

Overall, it is possible to say that Turkish policy-makers have adapted to the fact that Turkey is acting in a new European environment now. Among other challenges of the EU accession process, Turkey also needs to accomplish certain specific goals as to the finding of a solution to the Cyprus problem and a policy change towards Armenia. It needs to converge its policies towards the Middle East with those towards Europe and not end up facilitating the visa regime towards the Middle Eastern countries while it has to comply with Schengen border control standards pretty soon. On this latest incident, it is possible to see that the government is making cost-benefit calculations between easy and attainable goals in the Middle East and the difficult and costly goals towards Europe. The loss of credibility of the EU membership perspective since 2006 is playing into the hands of Euro-sceptics at this point to uphold other values and targets instead of the long-term European one. The freedom of movement between European countries is one of the most successful tools of building a European identity. The restriction on travel of Turkish citizens in Europe, but its facilitation into the Middle Eastern countries can be a future determinant of where Turks feel more at ease, in Europe or in the Middle East. Soner Çağaptay draws attention to this fact, foreign policy pursuit being not only an outcome of identity, but also a major input into building of a future identity.⁶

The increasing pre-dominance of the AKP government's Middle East policy over other items on the foreign policy agenda has raised questions about a 'shift of axis' in Turkish foreign policy away from the West and towards the Middle East. It is certain that due to its political background, the AKP government would want to enhance relations with the Middle East. However, its party programme reflected

⁶ S. Çağaptay, 2007. *Secularism and Foreign Policy in Turkey: New Elections, Troubling Trends*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 67.

aims concerning both the Middle East and EU accession. The party leaders often make remarks about the convergence of their policies towards the West and the Middle East or the Muslim world. They say their vision for Turkey is one that links these regions and they want Turkey to be given importance in both of these regions due to the position it holds in the other one. As the prospect of Turkey in the EU grows weaker, Turkish foreign policy under the AKP government becomes more pre-eminent in the Middle East since it is no longer balanced by a strong European perspective, for which the government holds only a partial responsibility.

In case Turkey's increasing ties with the Middle East is balanced by a strong European perspective, the EU might actually get rid of its former worries of getting involved in a conflict-prone neighbourhood through Turkey's membership in the EU. The present EU members fear that Turkey, as an EU member, could import the instability of its eastern and southern neighbours into the EU. Yet, a Turkey that has improving relations with all of its neighbours and is even extending the zone of economic and political cooperation beyond its borders with its eastern and southern neighbours, could, as an EU member, actually benefit the EU for extending its economic and political influence into the Middle East - a declared but not quite achieved foreign policy goal for Europe - as it does today in Eastern Europe after incorporating the Central and Eastern European countries as members.

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* She is the author of the forthcoming book *The Influence of the European Union on Turkish Foreign Policy*, Farnham (Ashgate), 2010.

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