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Middle East Brief

A Little America: The Emergence of Turkish Hegemony

Prof. Malik Mufti

Speaking in October 1957, then president Celal Bayar said that Turkey was working to emulate the United States so that it could one day become a prosperous and populous “little America.”¹ Although Bayar apparently did not coin the phrase, it has become associated with the political tradition initiated by the Democrat Party, of which he was a leader—and with good reason. To the adherents of that tradition, who would later include Turgut Özal as well as the leaders of the currently governing AK Party (Justice and Development Party)², becoming “a little America” encapsulates an aspiration for national greatness characterized by economic entrepreneurship and prosperity, dynamic political and social pluralism, and an assertive foreign policy. To their opponents, by contrast, the phrase evokes materialism and selfish individualism, the erosion of national cohesion at home, and dangerous adventurism abroad—all in the service of American imperialism. Today, at a time of radically conflicting interpretations about the direction in which the AK Party is taking Turkey, the notion of “a little America” gains added analytical traction as an expression of Turkey’s emerging bid for regional hegemony: as an actor seeking to project the kind of power—manifested in both its “hard” and “soft” variants—wielded by the United States at the global level.

The “Sea Change” in Turkish Foreign Policy: Conflicting Interpretations

The main features of the recent dramatic transformation in Turkish foreign policy are by now well known. Ankara has abandoned its traditionally aloof posture toward its neighbors in the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc in favor of an unprecedented level of political, economic, and cultural engagement. Its efforts to mediate regional conflicts have produced mixed results, including in some cases the generation of new tensions (most notably with Israel), but they all indicate an unconventional determination to *shape* Turkey’s geopolitical environment rather than simply react to it.

One school of thought traces what Michael Rubin calls this “profound shift” in Turkish foreign policy, what Barry Rubin describes as “the biggest [regional] strategic shift...since the Iranian revolution three decades ago,” to the AK Party victory in the November 2002 elections.³ The party’s Islamist ideology, according to this view, has ushered in an “illiberal nightmare” in Turkey’s domestic politics⁴ and a corresponding anti-Western turn in its international relations—manifested in closer ties with countries such as Russia, Iran, and Syria along with a deterioration in relations with Israel. Since, in the words of Soner Çagaptay, “Islamist thinking, as well as anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiments are all closely linked,”⁵ Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party is viewed as inimical to American interests as well. Çagaptay accordingly calls for a “zero tolerance policy by the United States...on the related anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli and anti-American rhetoric and meetings sponsored, funded and nurtured by the [AK Party] government,” while David Schenker questions “Turkey’s viability as a NATO member state,” and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA) argues that “[t]he United States should seriously consider suspending military cooperation with Turkey as a prelude to removing it from [NATO].”⁶ The AK Party’s activist foreign policy, according to this interpretation, arises not from pragmatic calculations of Turkish state interest—as suggested, for example, by the notion of “neo-Ottomanism”—but out of ideological fanaticism, said to be akin to “Wahhabism,” that is creating a virulently anti-American and anti-Western Turkish public opinion and political culture.⁷

Another school agrees that there has been a radical change in Turkish foreign policy, but denies that it is due to an illiberal or anti-Western turn driven by the AK Party. A group of specialists at the Transatlantic Academy, for example, ascribe the “sea change,” as they call it, to long-term domestic transformations as well as to new dynamics and opportunities created by the end of the Cold War and other regional upheavals in the Balkans and the Middle East.⁸ An April 2010 report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) concurs, noting that “[t]he basic trends in the country’s regional activism...were well established before AKP came to power.”⁹ The proponents of this approach point out that “NATO membership and the relationship with the U.S. remain pillars of Turkish policy”¹⁰ and argue that, if anything, Turkey has been moving in a more, not less, liberal direction.

Indeed, the defining feature of this alternative school of thought is that it discerns a fundamental shift from a confrontational, security-focused foreign policy to more cooperative, even integrationist, modes of interaction

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associated with liberal international relations theory. Pointing to Turkish mediation efforts in the Middle East, for example, Nathalie Tocci and Joshua Walker argue that Turkey has moved from an approach “largely framed within a realist understanding” to one aiming “to promote peace and regional integration.”¹¹ On the economic level, while Turkey’s overall degree of openness, measured by the value of its exports and imports as a percentage of total GDP, rose from 31.0 in 1990 to 52.3 in 2008, much of the increase was accounted for by the growth in trade with what the Transatlantic Academy team calls Turkey’s “neighborhood”: the Middle Eastern, Balkan, and former Soviet regions.¹² Thus, the share of Turkey’s foreign trade accounted for by the former Soviet world and the Middle East more than doubled between 1991 and 2008, from 11.9 percent to 25.5 percent.¹³ Much of this increase was due to energy, and is manifested in the network of pipelines for Russian, Azerbaijani, Iranian, and Iraqi oil and gas, which is transforming Turkey into an energy hub for the entire Eurasian region.

There is also increased openness in the movement of *people*, reflected in the dramatic liberalization of Turkish asylum, migration, and visa policies, especially during the past five years.¹⁴ Visa-free agreements have been implemented with numerous countries in the Balkans and the Middle East, and talks are underway on similar agreements with Russia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine. Citing officials who say they seek to remove visa requirements vis-à-vis *all* of Turkey’s neighbors, Juliette Tolay discerns the emergence in Ankara of a new “ideal conception of a post-modern and borderless world.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, here too the emphasis is regional: While the total annual number of foreign visitors to Turkey tripled, from 8.5 million to 25.5 million, between 1996 and 2009, the percentage of those coming from Turkey’s “neighborhood” rose from 32.2 to 40.1.¹⁶ Similarly, while the numbers “remain relatively small,” Turkish migrants going abroad are emigrating “increasingly to the former Soviet republics or to the Middle East”—a shift reflected also in the “dramatic increase” of flights by Turkish Airlines to destinations in those regions.¹⁷ Tolay concludes that Turkey’s decision to encourage “flows of people, trade, and ideas” suggests that it is abandoning the “realist view of balance of power, and a zero-sum understanding” of international relations, in favor of a “liberal idea of opening and interdependence”.¹⁸

Focusing specifically on the Middle East, the ICG report reaches the same conclusion: “Promoting free trade, facilitating transfers of technology and expertise and carrying out infrastructure integration projects all evoke a win-win attitude which has become a

catchphrase of Turkish diplomacy, by contrast with the zero-sum equation that traditionally has dominated the region.”¹⁹ Thus, free trade agreements have been signed with numerous regional actors, including Syria, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Israel. In terms of infrastructure, the Turkey-Syria-Iraq railroad line was reopened in February 2010, and there are plans for an Aleppo-Gaziantep high-speed train service as well as for reviving Syria-Jordan and Jordan-Saudi Arabia rail links along the old Ottoman Hejaz Railway. In addition, there are plans for a seven-country regional electricity grid, and for joint irrigation strategies with respect to the Euphrates-Tigris river system.²⁰ All this leads to the conclusion that “since the end of the Cold War, Turkey has been shifting its foreign policy priority from hard security concerns to soft power and commercial interests.”²¹ The ICG report, like that issued by the Transatlantic Academy, urges the United States to welcome and “support these efforts towards stabilisation through integration.”²²

Another Interpretation: Hegemony

The interpretation of Turkey’s foreign policy reorientation proposed here differs from both the “anti-Western Islamism” and “integrationist liberalism” schools of thought outlined above. Unlike the former school, the hegemony thesis ascribes the change in Turkish foreign policy to a tangible growth in Turkish capabilities that got underway long before the AK Party came to power, although the AK Party has indeed proven more adept at embracing the implications of this growth than have other political parties. Unlike the latter school, the hegemony thesis does not ignore the conflictual and even potentially expansionist aspects of Turkey’s emerging regional role. Unlike both alternative explanations, the hegemony thesis downgrades the salience of ideological motivations—whether Islamist or liberal—in Turkey’s current posture, discerning instead a generally pragmatic approach that is reminiscent of the last time the Turks exercised regional dominance, under the Ottoman Empire.

Although the liberal school of thought captures the complexities of Turkey’s reorientation better than the simple Manicheism of its “anti-Western Islamism” counterpart, its excessively pacific interpretation of current Turkish policy cannot be sustained either. Indeed, despite its overall rosy outlook, the ICG report cites some real concerns about Turkey’s growing influence—not just on the part of Israelis, but also attributed to unnamed Syrian, Egyptian, and Saudi

officials.²³ Such concerns should come as no surprise, because the complementarity between coercive power and what Joseph Nye has called “soft power”—the ability to exert influence through attraction—has long been familiar to students of politics. It is particularly prominent in Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, in which domination is facilitated by the fact that the dominated consent to, and indeed embrace and internalize, the norms and values of the prevailing order. A significant aspect of the geopolitical hegemony of the United States, for example, has been the fact that the American way of life—as experienced by foreign visitors, and as reflected in the consumer goods and cultural artifacts (movies, television shows, popular music) it exports abroad—has proven so attractive and such an object of emulation throughout the world. Since such attraction both reflects and buttresses the underlying hard power, openness is a natural characteristic of hegemony.

Turkey’s regional economic engagement is therefore not simply the product of an ideational shift in favor of freer trade policies. It is also a reflection of the size and dynamism of the Turkish economy, whose gross domestic product (GDP) is now “half as big as Russia’s, and twice that of Iran or Greece.”²⁴ With Turkish products staking out impressive shares even in previously hostile markets such as Armenia and Iraqi Kurdistan, why *wouldn’t* Ankara embrace free trade? The same is true with respect to regional engagement at the human level: The early republican model of isolation and xenophobia, in which foreign ideas and influences were viewed as threats to the internal order, is giving way to a confident new cosmopolitanism, whereby Istanbul and other Turkish cities are reclaiming their place as cultural centers for the entire region. The phenomenon of Turkish television shows, for example, and the enormous impact they have had in presenting to neighboring—especially Arab—countries a way of life that is both Muslim and modern, has been widely noted.

Additionally, there are signs that, as Kemal Kirişçi observes, Turkey’s democracy is itself “having a demonstrative spill over effect on its neighbors, however modest.”²⁵ This is true not only in Balkan and Caucasian states engaged in post-Communist transitions, but also in the Arab world, where equally revolutionary upheavals are underway. A widely cited 2009 poll, carried out by a Turkish think tank in seven Arab countries, found that an average of 63 percent of respondents believed that the Turkish political system constituted a successful synthesis of Islam and democracy; 61 percent thought that Turkey therefore served as a model for the Arab

world, and 77 percent felt that Turkey should play a larger role in their region.²⁶ Such findings naturally reinforce the worries about Turkish hegemonism within authoritarian official Arab circles—worries borne out by the support for the democratic aspirations of the Arab insurgencies expressed by Prime Minister Erdoğan this winter.

Finally, just as Turkey’s regional economic and cultural engagements reflect its increasing economic and cultural dynamism, its regional geopolitical engagement, exemplified by security cooperation agreements with many of its neighbors, reflects the magnitude and capability of Turkish strategic *power*—a fact not lost on anxious regional officials such as those cited in the ICG report.²⁷ Moreover, while Ahmet Davutoğlu the diplomat may call for an activist foreign policy of “zero problems” with Turkey’s neighbors, it is clear that Ahmet Davutoğlu the international relations scholar knows full well that the concept is oxymoronic. Hence the recent disputes with Israel over the latter’s treatment of Palestinians, reflecting the need to reverse what Davutoğlu himself calls Turkey’s “alienation” from its Middle East “hinterland” as a result of the “indexing” of its foreign policy to Israeli strategies. And hence Davutoğlu’s evocation of “the countercultural resistance power provided by Islam” as “the greatest element for breaking Slavic and Russian influence” in the Balkans and the Caucasus and beyond.²⁸

As Turkey settles into its regional hegemony and begins to establish its sphere of influence, therefore, it will inevitably come into tension with other actors who have similar ambitions in the same arenas: actors such as Russia, Iran, and Israel. It has already been suggested that there is an affinity between the political tradition to which the AK Party adheres and a more assertive or hegemonistic foreign policy approach.²⁹ Although this political tradition, which extends back through Turgut Özal and the Democrat Party (DP) of the 1950s, is generally associated with democratizing and liberalizing change within Turkey, it can hardly be said to encompass a post-realist or liberal integrationist worldview—as evidenced by the DP’s inclination to intervene militarily in Syria and Iraq, and by Özal’s eagerness to participate in the 1990–91 war against Saddam Hussein. At the same time, it is simply incorrect to depict either this political tradition, or the AK Party’s approach in particular, as essentially anti-American. A vivid recent illustration is provided by the Turkish parliament’s failure to sanction the deployment of U.S. troops on its territory against Iraq in 2003. Despite suggestions by some critics to the contrary, the AK Party leadership endorsed the

deployment, and most of its parliamentarians voted for it. It was the secularist Republican People's Party, backed by hard-line elements in the military, that voted en masse against it.³⁰

There is thus already ample evidence that a hegemonic Turkey will—indeed, very much like the Ottoman Empire before it—manage its inevitable foreign policy tensions in a pragmatic fashion, with a carefully calculated appreciation for the region's power balances. Turkey accordingly maintains correct relations—and on some issues and given certain configurations of the balance of power, even cooperative relations—with all of its regional rivals. But the underlying dynamic will remain competitive and will therefore always have the potential of erupting in overt conflict. Where ideology plays any role in this dynamic, it will be, as it has always been, as a handmaiden to *realpolitik*.

A Little America

A January 20, 2010, cable sent by James Jeffrey, the U.S. ambassador in Ankara, and subsequently published by WikiLeaks, expresses very well the importance of resisting simplistic generalizations when interpreting Turkish behavior: “Does all this mean that the country is becoming more focused on the Islamist world and its Muslim tradition in its foreign policy? Absolutely. Does it mean that it is ‘abandoning’ or wants to abandon its traditional Western orientation and willingness to cooperate with us? Absolutely not. At the end of the day we will have to live with a Turkey whose population is propelling much of what we see. This calls for a more issue-by-issue approach, and recognition that Turkey will often go its own way.”³¹ As Turkey sets about asserting itself as “a little America” in its neighborhood, therefore, its interactions with other actors are likely to manifest the same kind of variability—reflecting neither constant conflict nor “zero problems”—characteristic of all hegemonistic powers.

With respect to Iran, for example, Turkey will very likely maintain close ties in areas such as trade and energy, and will therefore continue—as it has in the past, even before the coming to power of the AK Party—to resist American pressure for a more confrontational stance. At the same time, however, an increasingly hegemonic Turkey will be more inclined to revive the old Ottoman policy of countering Persian regional influence—particularly along the two flanks of their common frontier, in Azerbaijan and (more to the point today) in Iraq, where Turkey is finally shedding its self-

imposed paralysis and reengaging with its historical proxies among the country's Sunni Arab and Kurdish communities. In exactly reciprocal fashion, Iran's desire to maintain open lines of communication with Turkey won't prevent it from continuing to cultivate friendly ties with Armenia, Greece, and the Greek Cypriots.

A similar pragmatism marks Turkey's posture toward Israel. Unlike the Iranian regime, whose efforts to project its power in the region are hampered by its Persian and Shi'ite identities, and which has accordingly seized on anti-Zionism as the best available vehicle for winning Arab hearts and minds, the AK Party has made it abundantly clear that it acknowledges Israel's place in the regional equation. As President Abdullah Gül put it some years ago: “Israel is now a reality, so we have to accept this reality...and secure peace.”³² Not only is there no question of Turkey's withdrawing diplomatic recognition from Israel, cooperative efforts on a range of issues—including robust economic ties in line with the free trade agreement that remains in effect between the two countries, as well as symbolic gestures such as sending fire-fighting planes to assist with Israel's December 2010 Carmel Forest fire—belie any meaningful conflation of Ankara's and Tehran's policies toward Israel. At the same time, the continuation of the Palestinian problem gives any Turkish government compelling reasons to oppose Israeli policies. Regionally, such opposition allows Ankara to outmaneuver not only Israel but also Iran in the competition for influence in the Arab world. Domestically, it capitalizes on the sympathy of the Turkish electorate for fellow Muslims in Palestine. How effectively Ankara balances its various imperatives vis-à-vis Israel—so that the recent downturn in bilateral relations, for example, remains tempered by calculations of *realpolitik*, and its costs do not come to outweigh its benefits—will depend to a significant extent on the skill of Turkey's leaders, because continually changing circumstances require continually changing calculations. The same is true with respect to other relationships: The initial confusion displayed in response to the Libyan and especially Syrian uprisings, for example, highlights the dangers of clinging rigidly to the status quo. Events are still unfolding and the outcomes remain uncertain, but the massive incongruity of the AK Party appearing to line up with authoritarian secular-nationalist regimes against populist opposition movements—and the long-term damage such a perceived stance would surely wreak on Turkey's position in the Arab world—suggest that here too it is impossible to avoid recalibrating relationships. The emerging signs that Ankara is indeed beginning to distance itself from both the Libyan and Syrian regimes

thus further confirm the bankruptcy of a “zero-problems” foreign policy at a time of revolutionary flux.

Finally, if the Middle East is Turkey’s strategic hinterland, the Balkans and the Caucasus once again constitute its geopolitical front line against its historical rival, Russia. Here as well, a hegemony-minded Turkey is likely to reenact the pragmatic Ottoman policy of coexistence and cooperation when interests converge—sometimes even in security matters, when a more urgent threat emerges—and of competition and encroachment into each other’s sphere of influence when opportunities arise. Beyond such tactical convergences and divergences of interest, however, the tectonic demographic and political transformations that are taking place across the breadth of Eurasia suggest that the overall long-term character of bilateral relations will be conflictual.

How Turkey’s pursuit of hegemony will affect other parties such as the United States, consequently, will depend in the end on those other parties’ calculations of their own interests, particularly with regard to the two great issues that seem likely to dominate the entire Near East for many years to come: the growing pressure on the authoritarian political order in the Arab world to the south, and the looming confrontation between the Islamic and Orthodox-Slavic worlds to the north. On both fronts, Turkey will proceed with some formidable advantages in both soft and hard power.

Endnotes

- 1 Quoted in Feroz Ahmad, *The Turkish Experiment in Democracy: 1950–1975* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), p. 71, n. 60.
- 2 Ed’s note: Also known as the AKP.
- 3 [Michael Rubin, “Shifting Sides? The Problems of Neo-Ottomanism,” *National Review Online*, August 10, 2004*](#), and [Barry Rubin, “Turkish Regime Changes Sides, West Averts Eyes,” *The Rubin Report*, June 6, 2010.](#)*
- 4 [Soner Çağaptay, “Free Media Will Save Turkish Democracy,” posted on *Middle East Strategy at Harvard \(MESH\)*, September 29, 2009.](#)* See also [David Schenker, “A NATO without Turkey? Ankara’s Islamist Government Is Turning Away from the Western Alliance,” *Wall Street Journal Europe*, November 5, 2009.](#)*
- 5 [Soner Çağaptay, “The AKP’s Hamas Policy III: Countering Radicalization,” *Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review*, July 9, 2010.](#)*
- 6 Ibid.; David Schenker, “Syria and Turkey: Walking Arm in Arm Down the Same Road?” *Jerusalem Issue Briefs*, vol. 9, no. 13 (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, December 1, 2009); [“It Is about the United States,” JINSA Report #995 \(The Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, June 8, 2010\).](#)*
- 7 [Soner Çağaptay, “Turkey’s Flip,” *Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review*, November 11, 2009.](#)* and [Harold Rhode, “Turkey: Secularism vs. Fundamentalism,” *Hudson New York*, June 4, 2010.](#)*
- 8 [Ahmet Evin et al., “Getting to Zero: Turkey, Its Neighbors and the West,” *Transatlantic Academy*, June 3, 2010, pp. 8, 12, 22.](#)* This report is a summary of papers presented by the authors at the International Studies Association (ISA) annual conference in New Orleans (February 18, 2010), which will appear in a volume entitled *Turkey and Its Neighbors: Foreign Relations in Transition*, ed. Ronald Linden et al., (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, forthcoming [2011]).
- 9 [International Crisis Group, “Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints” \(Europe Report No. 203, April 7, 2010\), pp. i, 1.](#)*
- 10 Ibid., p. i.
- 11 Nathalie Tocci and Joshua Walker, “From Confrontation to Engagement: Turkey and the Middle East” (2010 ISA paper) p. 1, in Linden et al., *Turkey and Its Neighbors*.
- 12 Evin et al., “Getting to Zero,” p. 23.
- 13 Ibid., p. 20.

- 14 Ibid., pp. 19–20.
- 15 Juliette Tolay, “Coming and Going: Understanding Changes in Turkish Foreign Policy through Migration” (2010 ISA paper), p. 13, in Linden et al., *Turkey and Its Neighbors*.
- 16 Kemal Kirişçi, “Diffusing Liberal Market and Democratic Values: Assessing Turkey’s ‘Soft Power’ in Transforming Its Neighborhood” (2010 ISA paper), p. 5, in Linden et al., *Turkey and Its Neighbors*.
- 17 Evin et al., “Getting to Zero,” pp. 11, 19.
- 18 Tolay, “Coming and Going,” pp. 11, 12, 18.
- 19 International Crisis Group, “Turkey and the Middle East,” p. 13.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 12, 13.
- 21 Ibid., p. i.
- 22 Ibid.; Evin et al., “Getting to Zero,” p. 30.
- 23 International Crisis Group, “Turkey and the Middle East,” pp. 11, 21.
- 24 Evin et al., “Getting to Zero,” p. 9.
- 25 Ibid., p. 7, citing Kirişçi, “Diffusing Liberal Market and Democratic Values.”
- 26 Mensur Akgün, Gökçe Perçinoğlu, and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, “Orta Doğu’da Türkiye Algısı,” *TESEV Yayınları, Dış Politika Analiz Serisi*, No. 10 (December 2009), pp. 18, 21, 22. The polls were held in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Syrians registered the highest positive responses on all three questions cited (72, 72, and 82 percent, respectively).
- 27 For two earlier expressions of concern that the military modernization of the 1980s and 1990s would increase Turkey’s autonomous security capabilities, and thus reduce its reliability as a security partner for the United States, see Michael Robert Hickok, “Hegemon Rising: The Gap Between Turkish Strategy and Military Modernization”, *Parameters*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Summer 2000), pp. 105–119; and Edward J. Erickson, “Turkey as Regional Hegemon – 2014: Strategic Implications for the United States”, *Turkish Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Autumn 2004), pp. 25–45.
- 28 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu*, 23rd ed. (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2007), pp. 57, 129, 250.
- 29 See Malik Mufti, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture: Republic at Sea* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), for the contending “republican” and “imperial” paradigms that have shaped Turkey’s security policies—and pp. 175–77, in particular, for the “imperial” views of AK Party leaders.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 152–55.
- 31 [Wikileaks 10ANKARA87](#).*
- 32 Interview with the author, Ankara, November 29, 2000.

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