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Turkey's political-emotional transition

Carsten Wieland, 6 - 10 - 2009

Turkey is engaged in a renegotiation between its pro-west commitments and its family ties to east and south. This is part of a wider shift in regional relationships and perspectives, says Carsten Wieland.

6 - 10 - 2009

Turkey's foreign minister Ahmed Davutoglu made a telling remark during a visit to Damascus in late August 2009. The immediate question concerned a dispute between Syria and Iraq over alleged Syrian involvement in a series of bombings in Baghdad, and Turkish attempts at mediation. The foreign minister responded: "For Turkey, both Syria and Iraq are strategic allies, as well as our brothers and our neighbours. This is a family matter for us, which is why we want to solve this dispute through negotiations to prevent any escalation."

Ahmed Davutoglu's response was amply, even gleefully, [reported](#) in Syrian state newspapers. No wonder, for his remark has profound implications for Turkey's foreign-policy orientation. For to refer to Turkey's relationships with Iraq and Syria as an internal "family matter" goes beyond diplomatic courtesy; and it is only one of several indications of a [changing approach](#) and rhetoric - even more fundamentally, of a different *emotional discourse* in Turkey. Whereas politicians of continental European countries have often referred to the European Union or its predecessors as "the European family of states", Turkey is coming to see its more intimate bonds as lying not with Europe but rather with the [former](#) antagonists of Ottoman colonial times: its Arab-Muslim neighbours.

The evidence is clear from opinion-polls and many other indices. The broad aspiration to European Union membership [persists](#), but frustration with perceived EU double-standards in its enlargement policy and "broken promises" concerning Turkey's full-membership status reinforces the trend. In autumn 2004, 62% of Turks said it would be a good thing for their country to join the European Union; by late 2008, 42% [expressed](#) the same view.

Many Europeans and Americans sense the change, and their worries about Turkey are increasing as a result. The ensuing debate often tends to resort to the loaded and provocative question ("who lost Turkey?") or the tired stereotype (the east-west bridge that needs repair). It is ultimately for Turkey and the Turks to decide the future direction of the [country](#). What is clear is that Turkey's strategic and diplomatic position - to its neighbours in the region, and to leading powers beyond - is more crucial than ever.

A great reversal

This fluid situation marks a great difference from only two decades ago, after the fall of communism in Europe after 1989. A new epoch started with Turkey - a Nato member and one of the most important "frontline" states - deepening its ties within the western alliance. Turkey's role seemed all the more valuable in the context of rising ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and the Caucasus, the call of Islamist *mujahideen* to support Muslims in the former Ottoman province of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the geopolitical uncertainties of the post-Soviet space.

There was no doubt where Ankara belonged. In 1996-97, a still firmly secularist Turkey signed a military alliance and then a free-trade agreement with Israel (which Ankara had recognised in 1949, the first Muslim-majority state to do so). In 1998, Turkey and Syria came close to war amid accusations that Damascus backed Kurdish rebels in Turkey,

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and that Ankara was [withholding](#) precious water from the Euphrates river. At the last minute, Syria acceded to Turkish demands by expelling the leader of the [militant](#) Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan.

In the course of the 2000s, however, five emergent factors began to put a severe strain on Turkey's western orientation.

First, the final breakdown of the Oslo [peace process](#) between Israel and the Palestinians. When Turkey and Israel sealed their military cooperation in the mid-1990s, polarisation in the middle east was at a low and a Palestinian state seemed to be in reach. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the Israeli government jumped on the bandwagon of George W Bush's "war on (Islamist) terror" and handily incorporated their Palestinian problem into this ideological context

Second, the electoral victory of the religiously inspired *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice & Development Party / AKP) in November 2002. The Turkish state had encouraged the dissemination of Islamic thought as a welcome distraction from communist seductions during the cold war. But a process once begun could not easily be controlled: these ideas trickled into minds and institutions, and - after a few thwarted attempts - came to [challenge](#) the stalwarts of the *ancien régime*.

Third, the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 by a United States-led coalition, accompanied by George W Bush's polarising rhetoric *vis-à-vis* the Arab and Muslim world. This has had two effects. First, the sense of religious identity and collective feelings of injustice (which included a rising identification with the Palestinian cause) gained ground in Turkey's public discourse. Second, the establishment of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq alarmed Turkey's state and military establishment. As a natural consequence, Turkey drew closer to those of its neighbours with substantial Kurdish populations (Syria and Iran) and moved further from the US orbit.

The Ankara parliament's [refusal](#) to support the invasion of Iraq - including a rejection of the AKP government's agreement to grant the US access to Turkey's airbase in Incirlik, and a denial to the US of overflight rights during the war - was a historic moment. Arabs cheered, knowing that their own puppet parliaments would never have succeeded in thus confronting the US administration - and in the name of democracy.

The new distrust between Turkey and the United States / Israel has been [intensified](#) by subsequent events - among them the Israeli military operations in Lebanon in July-August 2006 and in Gaza in December 2008 - January 2009. The Turkish government has condemned Israel's inflicting of heavy Palestinian civilian casualties and its targeted killings of Hamas figures, and has received Hamas leaders in Ankara. Turks questioned by polling surveys show even less [sympathy](#) for the United States than their fellow Muslims in Arab countries, in Iran or in Pakistan. Turkey's president, Abdullah Gül, was swift to congratulate his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after the latter's declared [election](#) victory in June 2009.

Fourth, a Syria-Turkey rapprochement. Against the background of these evolving tensions, Syria's president visited Turkey for the first time in January 2004. Bashar al-Assad's trip represented the beginning of a new relationship between the two countries. By the end of 2004 they had signed a free-trade agreement, started to clear the mines laid at their border, and opened the way to cooperative civil and military projects.

The narrowing of Syria's foreign-policy [options](#) after the Iraq war (and its military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005) meant that it benefited greatly from the reconciliation with Turkey. The longstanding border dispute was quietly put aside: Syrian maps still portrayed Turkey's contemporary province of Alexandretta (including the cities of Antakya/Hatay and Iskenderun) as Syrian territory, but in September 2005 the official Syrian newspaper *Tishreen* for the first time printed a map without the disputed areas. The new realities no longer leave room for nationalist revisionism.

Fifth, an increase of tension between Turkey and the European Union. It seemed for a time in the early 2000s that the AKP's success would lead to a rapprochement between Turkey and European institutions. But it soon became clear that the [road](#) ahead would be much bumpier and more contradictory than many had predicted.

Turkey's relations with Europe appeared to be on track as late as 3 October 2005, when the fundamental decision was made officially to [open](#) accession talks. The electoral cycle in France and Germany soon

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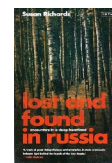
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intervened, bringing to power governments in these crucial European states that were opposed to Turkish [membership](#) of the European Union.

March 2009)

The Turkish side was enraged by talk of a "privileged partnership" and other such substitutes for full belonging, regarding these as a betrayal after the decision of 2005. Ankara also pointed to [Bulgaria](#) and [Romania](#), accepted into the EU in 2007 despite these states' shaky credentials in some areas. Many Turks had felt an injury to their national pride when their country had been rebuffed at the Luxembourg summit in 1997 ; now, in the context of the anti-Muslim ambience of the Bush administration and its close allies, they thought that an [element](#) of religious prejudice was at work.

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A creative confusion

The implication of the above might appear that Turkey is already "lost" for the west. But the very way this point is expressed itself deserves scrutiny - for the identity of "the west" (and many of its aspects (the relation between the European Union and the United States, the place of Israel) are less certain than ever. The fluid alliances and cleavages of interest around the Bosphorus also make the Turkish issue all the more complicated and elusive of such simplifying categories.

Two examples illustrate this complexity. The first is secularism, whose defence as a core value would make the Kemalist elite the "natural partner" of the European political class. The desired outcome is that [support](#) for Turkish secularism would contain and in time reverse opposing trends: the spread of Islamic ideas and rules in many Turkish neighbourhoods, the growth of Arab-Muslim influence, and the increase of religious intolerance (particularly against Jews, whose *millet* communities were integral to Ottoman society).

The problem is that Kemalists in Turkey have failed consistently to stand for civil and human rights, freedom of speech, and other core "western" principles - embodied too in the European Union's *acquiscommunitaire* to which aspiring entrants to the union are obliged to integrate into their own law before being allowed to join. Moreover, Kemalists are profoundly nationalist to the extent that it is hard to imagine them giving up core aspects of national sovereignty in favour of European institutions and concepts (whereas politicians inspired by Islamic ideas, for whom the *umma* is in the end the sole legitimate collectivity, have tended to have less of a stake in nationalism).

The second example is civil liberty, and political and economic liberalism more generally. Their defence as a core value would mean that the European political class would find more common ground with the moderate Islamists of the AKP. After all, the AKP has done more than any secular government in Turkey in pushing through reforms of the judiciary, of civil-military relations, and of human-rights practices.

It can be said then that the Islamist AKP have fought and won elections on an aggressively pro-European platform (in part in order to [secure](#) the votes of the moderate, commercial middle class), while the Kemalist secularists remained in their trenches of an illiberal, obsolete 19th century ethno-nationalism. The political spectrum looks likely to remain polarised between (broadly non-extreme) Islamists and Kemalists; a third political force may one day [develop](#) a winning combination of liberalism and secularism, though there is no sign of that at present. In the meantime, it is no surprise that many western observers feel confused when they observe Turkey's politics.

An Arab-Turkish turn

These new realities are especially hard for Turkish secularists to accept. The popular discourse promoted in recent years by successive American presidents (Barack Obama [included](#)) of Turkey as the "model" democratic state in the Muslim world often leaves them feeling offended, excluded and even betrayed. They see the west as supporting the "wrong" side, thus endangering Turkey's westward-looking tradition rooted in the *tanzimat* (Ottoman reforms) of the 19th century.

At the same time, Turkey has also been awarded a kind of "model-state" character from both moderate Arab Islamists and Arab secularists. This represents a sharp change from many Arabs' condemnation of Turkey for its imperial past and its pro-Nato and pro-Israel present. In addition, Islamists recall Kemal Atatürk's abolition of the caliphate in 1924. For different reasons, many moderate Arab Islamists and among the Arab secularist opposition today see in Turkey a working model of democracy in dire contrast to their own authoritarian (and secular) Arab regimes.

The fact that Turkey has gained new and wide credibility in the Arab world in recent years emphasises the importance of Turkey's internal *emotional discourse*. The AKP government may have made great efforts on the judicial and political levels to convince European leaders of their pro-European sincerity; but on the affective and moral levels, its and Turkish society's discourse is drifting towards the Muslim and the Arab-Muslim world - its agendas, its anxieties, its concerns.

Turkey's political, military, and social history - and its geographical position - mean that it will never become fully a middle-eastern Muslim country. Ankara has through moments of turbulence

remained a reliable and pragmatic political partner for the United States, the European Union or even Israel; it is still searching for a new role in a multipolar world; and it is part of the country's *raison d'état* to seek to improve its relationships with its neighbours.

Such improvement is good for the west as well as for Turkey and its neighbours - something apparent in Turkey's mediation efforts in the Israeli-Syrian portfolio, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, towards [Iran](#), and perhaps in [relation](#) to Georgia-Russia. The United States, the European states and the United Nations have been responsible for many have failed peacemaking attempts in the middle east; there is an opportunity for a regional power with great diplomatic and intelligence expertise, and that is equally accepted by Arab Muslims and (still) by Israel, to take up the challenge.

A multipolar future

The AKP government - [re-elected](#) with a bigger majority in July 2007 - has tried to maintain the balance between its neighbours to west, east and south. This is exemplified by the fact that a day after Turkey's foreign minister called Syria and Iraq part of Ankara's "family", Turkey made a historic step in opening the way to establishing diplomatic relations with [Armenia](#). This process of "normalisation" underscores Turkey's growing role in the Caucasus, as well as fulfilling an important EU demand - though the hardest test, recognising the Armenian [genocide](#) of 1915, is still to come.

But there are tests for Europe too in relation to Turkey, which if anything are accentuated by the greater likelihood of the Lisbon treaty being ratified after Ireland's second [referendum](#) on 1 October 2009 (and by the second electoral victory of Angela Merkel in [Germany](#) on 27 September). Ankara has made progress in its outlook and relationships that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. For the European Union to respond to Turkey's new emotional discourse with one of its [own](#) - drawing on religious and cultural biases, for example - would be wrong, counterproductive and self-defeating. Europe, after all, is home to sectarian division in [Northern Ireland](#); to secular Muslims in Bosnia who in the 1990s resisted an Islamist takeover amid one of the [darkest](#) chapters of their history; and to states that in their foreign policy have rarely put great emphasis on "western" values such as secularism or civil liberties. Turkey should be judged on the detail of its judicial and institutional progress, not on indiscriminate categories or fuzzy concepts such as civilisational heritage; and its western partners should receive the same principle of scrutiny.

The degree to which Turkish democracy has matured since 2002 will be measured once the AKP loses its first election. If Turkey's pragmatic and business-oriented middle class uses its influence to contain the Islamisation of the public sphere and institutions, a modern secular and/or liberal force might emerge as a political counterweight. If a more conservative camp prevails in the religious or in the nationalist sense, further structural changes may occur that could alter Turkey's fabric more profoundly.

Meanwhile, a Turkey whose heart at present is turning south and east will still have to balance its role among a host of interlocutors: the European Union, the United States and Israel as well as the Muslim middle east, Russia, the Caucasus, and former Soviet (and Turkic) [central Asia](#). If and when European Union membership will become possible remains open, given present conditions. Whatever happens, the process must remain transparent, fair, and as free of prejudice and emotionally laden categories as possible. The dangers as well as the possibilities of Turkey's region and of a multipolar world make mutual respect and democratic principle essential conditions of progress.

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Cristian Rus (not verified) said:

Romania joined the EU in 2007, Jan 1st, not in 2004.

**Mon, 2009-10-12
09:22**

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O t (not verified) said:

I just wanted to point out the same issue as Helen did. It needs to of higher priority to write the names correctly, I guess as the name that is used in the article is more of an Arab name than Turkish and which may lead to misunderstandings.

**Wed, 2009-10-07
14:12**

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Kolinsky Most (not verified) said:

I have just returned from Cyprus, where I was appalled to find in Famagusta and northern Nicosia, beautiful churches converted into mosques, with minarets and Turkish and North Cypriot flags flying above them. Deserted Catholic and Orthodox churches and former Greek Cypriot homes fenced off with forbidden entry signs in Turkish. And the beach skyline of deserted Greek Cypriot-built hotels of Vorosha still fenced off and gutted by Turkish bombing in 1974. I talked to Turkish Cypriots who are fed up with Turkish military occupation and want to unite with the Republic of Cyprus so that all Cyprus can become a member of EU. This cannot happen as long as the Turkish military occupation continues, and stunts the north Cyprus economy. Mr Wieland completely ignores this stumbling block to Turkey's membership in the EU.

**Wed, 2009-10-07
07:53**

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helen_s (not verified) said:

The correct spelling of the surname is Davutoğlu. Turkish uses a Latin script. There is no need for a rerendering of the name such as appears in this article.

**Wed, 2009-10-07
07:27**

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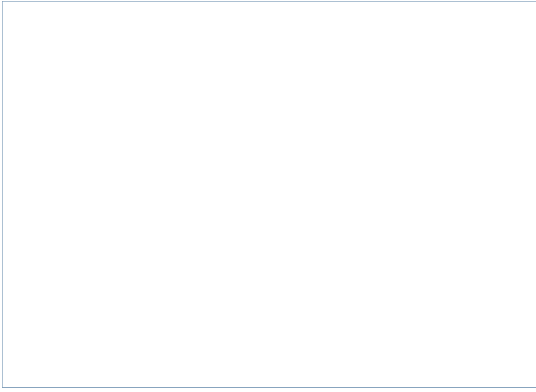
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