

**Günter Seufert**

## **Internal Driving Forces for Turkey's Middle East Policy Potential and Limits of Turkey's Policy in the Region**

### **Introduction**

Until summer 2011 there was a lot of talk about Turkey's "soft power": On the ground, we witnessed an incredible increase of trade with neighbouring countries; free movement of persons, ideas and cultural products, particular Turkish TV serials. In the Middle East, Turkey enlarged the scope of its foreign policy beyond the entrenched ethnical and sectarian divide of the region and showed remarkable endeavours to create "regional solutions" to "regional problems" (Iraq war, Iran, Syria, Libya). As regards political rhetoric, Ankara applied a new discourse of common interests (based on common history, culture and civilisation) of the countries in the Middle East.

What we saw was a kind of "Europeanization" of Turkey's foreign policy, not in the sense of Turkey's compliance with the EU's foreign policy positions, but in the sense of an effort to create an economically and later also politically integrated area in the Middle East that replicated at least some components of European policy having led to the creation of the European Communities.

The best known examples as for the endeavours to create such an economically integrated zone in the region are the high number of mutual free trade and visa free travel agreements. Zafer Çağlayangil, the Turkish Minister of Trade, voiced his vision of creating a zone of prosperity in the Middle East with Turkey and the Levantine countries (Syria,

Jordan, Lebanon) as the heart of a new Union in the Middle East, and Prime Minister Erdoğan talked already about a visa free travel region in the Middle East calling it Schamgen (referring to the Arabic name of Damascus, Scham, and hinting to the Schengen agreement between EU-member countries).

In a number of shattering cases this "Europeanization" of Turkish foreign policy clashed with U.S.' and EU's expectations, most notably with regard to Iran-Syria, Israel, Libya, but also Russia. Turkey was accused of a "shift of axis" in foreign policy and particularly in the U.S. the question was asked, if the West – due to the EU's reluctant policy towards Turkey's EU-membership bid – had lost Turkey.

But despite all subsequent criticism, this Turkish policy, in a lot of ways, contributed heavily to stability and regional integration in the Middle East – be it at the expense of direct U.S. or European influence.

Today we see a very different picture: Turkey – as the new phrase goes – is "again in the Western fold". It is in the centre of the Syrian resistance; hosts the NATO radar against Teheran; and is opposed to Russia in regard to Syria and Cyprus.

But Turkey today appears to be relatively isolated from its direct Southern and Eastern neighbours; appears to be more vulnerable than ever to the PKK; is stripped of its role as *the* potential leader of the region and as a state with an "inclusive Middle East identity" able to bridge the ethnic and sectarian divide in the region. On the contrary, Turkey today appears to be simply one member of a coalition made up of the Sunni Muslim states of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, other Gulf-states and Turkey itself. Turkey appears to be deprived of the broader foreign policy leeway it was able to establish just recently; it is no longer able to carry on with its role as a uniting factor for the region and stability provi-

der; and we observe a new militarisation of Turkey's foreign policy, in particular towards Syria, Cyprus but also Iraq.

This situation bears serious disadvantages for Turkey. It were the different approaches of some European states and the U.S. regarding the war against Saddam Hussein, the question how to treat Iran and the Palestine question that had helped to widen the room of manoeuvre in foreign policy for Turkey. Today, however, the country again has to rely heavily on the U.S.

At the same time the current situation is not really satisfactory for Europe: Given the developments in the Middle East, in particular the overall trend to sectarian front lines in Syria and Iraq, Europe is in dire need of Turkey's ability to exert "soft power", to regain its status as a non-sectarian power and to act again as a uniting force in the Middle East. Thus paradoxically enough, Europe, which criticized the country's more independent foreign policy, may be interested in Turkey's capacity to carry on with a more independent regional policy.

How did it come that Turkey was able to develop its new and more independent foreign policy and to exert "soft power"? And how did it come that Turkey was not able to continue with this kind of policy and even worse, finds itself in the corner of sectarian politics? Surely the Arab revolutions turned everything upside down. But why was Turkey especially concerning the Syrian question – not able to draw the vital line between solidarity with the Syrian people and loyalty to the Western alliance on the one hand and slipping into an ad hoc coalition with Qatar and Saudi Arabia and opposing Iran and Iraq on the other hand?

In my view, as far as the Turkish part of the puzzler is concerned, both questions can be answered by having a closer look on how the mentio-

ned "Europeanization of Turkey's foreign policy" actually happened, what this policy contained and implied but also what it omitted and failed to achieve.

### **Attributes of the "Europeanization" of Turkey's Foreign Policy**

Turkey (like the EU) considers itself a model or at least a source of inspiration for its neighbouring countries in the realms of politics (particularly for the Muslim countries), as well as economic and societal development including culture, science, and education.

*Turkey (like the EU) links its own attractiveness in the region to the fact that it was able to change its image of being an authoritarian, in economic terms statist and in cultural terms ethnocentric nation state (the Kemalist Republic) that grasped itself as living in steady conflicts with its neighbours (motto: Turks don't have friends others than Turks).*

Turkey (like the EU) regards itself as an economic powerhouse whose wealth depends on an export oriented economy, which by its very nature needs a neighbourhood marked by stability, peace, development and welfare.

Turkey (like the EU) claims responsibility for stability, peace and security in its vicinity and it adopted the motto "regional solutions for regional problems" thus proving its own impact and influence at the expense of more distant actors. Cases in point are Turkey's initiative to establish regional cooperation to prevent the U.S. invasion into Iraq; Ankara's broker together with Brazil in the nuclear issue of Iran, Turkey's efforts to mediate an agreement between Syria and Israel and between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia.

Turkey (like the EU) aims at the transformation of its neighbourhood understood as the emulation of Turkey by the neighbouring states.

To this end, Turkey (like the EU) worked for the breakdown of impediments to the free move of goods, services and people by foreign trade agreements and mutual visa liberalisation agreements.

Turkey (like the EU) has developed a reading of history beyond and alternative to the history of the ethnically based nation state. This alternative reading of history, actually the rehabilitation of the Ottoman Empire, justifies the central role the country wants to play in the region and bestows Turkey with a new historical mission.

### **How Did Turkey Develop These Features?**

The leading political circles in Turkey argue that the country has successfully completed an internal political transformation implicating a new vision for society, for nationhood, for the national economy and for Turkey's place in the region and the world.

In the centre of this transformation there is a kind of democratisation. But this 'democratization' occurred first and foremost as the integration of the Muslim conservative part of the population in the realms of politics, economy and education. This happened to the extent that new political, economic and academic elites had come into existence and function. The Kemalist state had obstructed participation of this societal group in a myriad of ways: From the ban of student head scarves at universities to the outlawing of political parties and from partisan economic and infrastructure policy to the detriment of Muslim conservati-

ve business to the marginalisation of conservatives in the bureaucracy.

*As a corollary, basic attributes of the Republican ideology are rejected today, particularly authoritarian secularism, the legitimacy of the military's interference in politics, the equation of progress with Westernism and European culture, the denial of ethnical as well as confessional diversity in the population, and the reading of Ottoman history as a period of prolonged and inevitably decline.*

The current leadership argues that Turkey managed to overcome the secularist modernising nation state whose military and bureaucracy enjoyed an array of privileges had considerable influence on a more or less ineffective state run economy and had often not felt the need to take the cultural, social and political demands of the main bulk of society into account.

With the integration of the moderate Muslim electorate and its representatives into the *political system*, Turkey rode the storm of militant Islamism, one of the most serious challenges for the political transformation in the Arab and the wider Muslim world.

The dynamism of pious entrepreneurs from Anatolia constitutes a major driving force for the change of the *economic structure* and for the conquest of new markets. It puts an end to the rhetoric of Muslim societies doomed to fail in economics.

The privatisation and diversification of the *educational sector* accounts for the production of a conservative academic elite able to storm secularist bridgeheads in the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the universities

and equipped to work out an alternative vision of state, nation and history in Turkey.

However, the mentioned equation of “democratization” with the granting of more political, economic and cultural rights to the conservative part of society, also points to the limits in the parallelism of Turkey’s and the EU’s self-understanding and the foreign policy that derives from it.

### **The Limits of the “Europeanization” of Turkey’s Foreign Policy**

Turkey did not formulate any ethical criteria for the cooperation with states as well as with political and societal actors of foreign countries and does not apply mechanisms of conditionality. The most striking example is the friendship between Prime Minister Erdoğan and Sudan’s President of State Ahmed al-Bashir that entraps every claim and argument regarding a value based foreign policy.

Turkey, in the countries it wants to have influence upon, does generally not support civil society organisations active in the fields of human rights, environment, gender equality, the rule of law, transparency, sustainable development, the rights of labourers and the like.

Turkey not even claims to be ethnically-blind and religiously-blind in its support for states and groups in populations. States with a (Sunni) Muslim and / or a Turkish-speaking majority are in the centre of Turkey’s development aid. In non-Muslim majority states, Turkey directs the lion share of its support to the (Sunni) Muslims and /or Turkish speaking groups of the population. The Turkish Development Agency TIKA was established for action in the Turkic states, which emerged from the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Also in the Balkans, Turkey canali-

zes its activities primarily to Muslim and Turkish speaking groups.

A similar ‘cultural bias’ is observable in Turkey’s diplomacy. Prime Minister Erdoğan explicitly stated this in his famous “balcony speech” after his last electoral victory in June 2011 when he mentioned “friendly and brotherly nations from Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Sarajevo, Baku and (Turkish) Nicosia”, and said later on: “The hopes of the victims and the oppressed have won,” and, “Beirut has won as much as İzmir. West Bank, Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem have won as much as Diyarbakir. The Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans have won, just as Turkey has won.”

Turkey’s Balkan diplomacy cares particularly for the Bosniaks in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Kosovo-Albanians, and in the name dispute between Greece and FYROM Turkey backs the latter.

In the Muslim Middle East, until the Arab Awakening, Turkey developed a balanced approach towards different ethnic and confessional states and groups such as Sunnis and Shiites, Arabs, Iranians, the Syrian Alawi regime and even the Kurds of Northern Iraq. In this period of time, Turkey capitalised heavily on what may be called a general Muslim identity beyond the confessional divide. On numerous occasions, Erdoğan and his Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu evoked the commemorative icon of one Muslim people rich in diversity with regard to language and statehood but all subjugated and humbled by European invaders and colonialists, and thus eager to rebuild their civilization and to regain their dignity.

At the outset of the Arab spring, the Turkish government read the developments with the eyes of its own internal experiences, and threw its support behind the democratic demands of the people of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya who rose against governments of secularist nationalist republics. (However, Ankara, like the West, turned a blind eye on the protests in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, where people raised their voices against monarchies that draw on Sunni Islam to legitimize the monarchy and the incumbent ruler.)

When things spun out of control in Syria, and when Iran and Iraq openly backed the regime in Damascus, Turkey more and more burgeoned into a Sunni Muslim actor, closing ranks with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. From this moment, relations with Iran and with the Shiite dominated government of Iraq quickly deteriorated, as did the relations with Lebanon and the Hezbollah. The main reason for this is undoubtedly the development of the Syrian question into a global power struggle.

However, that Turkey was so easily pushed in the corner of Sunni sectarianism is also closely related to basic assumptions in the foreign policy concept of the AKP government and its incumbent Foreign Minister that from the very beginning indicated a culturally coloured foreign policy vision.

- There is a deep-rooted yearning for a Muslim civilization and culture, destroyed by Western colonialism and hegemony.
  - There is an understanding of the modern Turkish state and all its capabilities as the instrument to rebuild all this in Turkey and the region.
  - There is the concept of a nation that finds fulfilment in the rebuilding of a vanished civilization and in the regain of lost strength and dignity.

- Thus, there is a deeply culturally coloured concept of the sovereign; the nation that helps to explain why granting rights and liberties to the Muslim conservative part of society was so easily equated with democratisation.

Regarding *interior policy*, the Turkish government is accused of having stopped all the reforms that could lead to the creation of an equal footing of non-Turkish (Kurds), non-Sunni (Alawites), non-Muslims and not explicitly religiously bound groups (secularists) in the political arena. The government is accused of being content with the secured political rule of the own religious-cultural block at the expense of other groups in society resulting in new authoritarianism.

Regarding its Syrian policy, the AKP government is criticised for not only having supported primarily the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and for having omitted to establish ties to the other parts of Syrian society, most notably the Druses, the Christians and the Kurds. More than this, the government is accused of having warned the Syrian opposition not to promise any status to the Kurds of the country. Thus the Turkish government is at least partly held accountable for the disunity of the Syrian opposition.

Thus, criticism of Turkey's interior policy and criticism of Turkey's foreign policy merge in the point that Ankara, in both realms, favours Sunni Muslim actors and views non Sunni-Muslims, in particular Kurds and Alawites, as actors of minor legitimacy or even as actors that lack political legitimacy at all. Such an approach does fit neither the situation in Turkey nor the situation in Syria.

Dr. Günter Seufert is a senior associate with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. His latest publication bears the title Foreign Policy and Self-Image. The societal Basis of Strategy Shifts in Turkey, SWP-Research Paper, 12/2012.

### **Summary**

The moaning about Turkey's purported "shift of axis" has given way to the complacent assessment that Turkey is "again in the Western fold". As Turkey has closed ranks not only with the U.S. but also with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it is seen as the mere member of a Sunni-Muslim coalition in the region today. Ankara is deprived of its nimbus of being a uniting power in the Middle East, able to bridge the sectarian divide – the main threat for all states in the region. Reasons for this development, the article argues, are not only the effects of the Arab Spring but also Turkey's limited understanding of democratization that, for a great deal, until now exhausted in the integration of conservative Sunni-Muslim actors in the realms of politics, economy and education.