
The New Turkish Republic

Introduction

Is Turkey in the Middle East?

Ten years ago, while traveling through a town in central Anatolia, I visited a historic Seljuk mosque. There, I struck up a friendly conversation with a local Turk who eventually asked me how I learned Turkish and what I did for a living. I replied that I was a Middle East specialist. “Then what are you doing in Turkey?” he replied, with no trace of irony. Indeed, what was I doing there? Was I simply spending a few weeks on vacation in Turkey while away from the Middle East? Or was I on the job, seeking insights into a key part of a diverse Middle East?

Whether Turkey is a part of the Middle East has been the subject of emotional debates for well over a century. Responses have varied depending on the era or the political juncture in which the question was asked. Furthermore, definitions of the Middle East itself have changed. It is, after all, a construct, making generalizations difficult and imprecise. For Ankara, the term “Middle East” represents Turkey’s immediate Muslim neighbors, most all of whom fell outside the mainstream focus of Turkish foreign policy for much of the twentieth century. It also represents an agglomeration of regional states of differing character enjoying inconsistent relations among themselves. But if Turkey is indeed linked to the Middle East, however defined, how so? Today’s Arabs, Turks, and Westerners all have different perspectives on the matter.

The question of Turkey’s “real” orientation is multilayered, involving a range of variables, such as geography, history, culture, ethnicity, geopolitics, nationalism, religion, tradition, psychology, and identity. The simple answer, of course, is “yes”: Turkey is indeed part of the Middle East—just as it is also part of Europe, the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Caucasus in geopolitical and geographic terms. But the question goes well beyond geography: it also probes issues related to identity, orientation, and aspirations. Among Turks the question itself is a sensitive one—how individuals respond often says much about their own personal politics.

But the question of Turkey’s place in the Muslim world is determined not only by the Turks’ own perceptions of themselves but also by the perceptions of others. For example, today Turkey is struggling to convince European states that it is indeed a Western country that deserves admission into the European Union. And until the 1960s, the U.S. State Department bureaucratically handled Turkey within the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. When Turkey joined NATO, it was transferred by the stroke of a pen into the Bureau of European

Affairs. Turkey was quite simply reclassified—dare we say upgraded?—to the status of a European country, both to gratify the Turks' own Western aspirations and for bureaucratic convenience. Were the State Department ever to bureaucratically redesignate Turkey back into the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Turks would undoubtedly perceive it as a serious insult, fraught with negative cultural, political, and psychological significance.

Even if Turkey is part of Europe, its geographical location in the Middle East invariably thrusts it into the heart of Middle Eastern politics, whether the Turks like it or not. But from the founding of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, its relations with most former Muslim regions of the Ottoman Empire have been limited and strained. Only relatively recently has Turkey's involvement in the Middle East begun to change course dramatically.

Turkey in a Snapshot

Turkey has been a country of exceptional importance throughout the history of the Muslim world and has existed in two dramatically differing incarnations, first as the Seljuk/Ottoman Empire and later as the modern Turkish Republic.

- Founded by Turks, the Ottoman Empire stood at the center of the Muslim world for six centuries. The largest, longest-lasting, and most powerful empire in Islamic history, its rule extended far north into the Balkans, throughout Anatolia, and across almost all of the Arab world, including North Africa at one point. Additionally, it was one of the most successful and stable models of a multiethnic and multicultural empire of its time, and it was the seat of the Islamic Caliphate—the supreme religious office for the entire Sunni world.
- Arising out of the ruins of the defeated Ottoman Empire, the modern Turkish Republic, led by the brilliant, autocratic, and westernizing leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, went on to form what has become the most advanced, powerful, secular, and democratic state in the Muslim world. A member of NATO, it is now a candidate for membership in the European Union in 2015.

In 2002, Turkey made history by freely electing—for the first time in Muslim history—an Islamist party to national power. Still in power in 2007, this government seeks to harmonize the legacy of Kemalism and Turkey's forced march toward westernization with the more traditional and Islamic elements of Turkish culture. Just as the country bids to play an expanded international role between East and West, it also seeks to create a new domestic synthesis between traditional and modern values.

In this context, Turkey's global strategy is undergoing considerable revision under multiple influences both domestic and foreign. Ankara increas-

ingly perceives its own interests in independent terms and as somewhat divergent from Washington's regional agenda. There are clear signs that Turkey, touted for decades as a loyal ally of the United States, can no longer be counted on to routinely demonstrate its loyalty. To be sure, some of these shifts in Turkey parallel the changes in attitude toward Washington that are occurring in other countries.

Turkish and American interests are most troubled when it comes to issues related to the Muslim world. Turkey, as an emerging regional power, is no longer comfortable with interventions by the United States, particularly when they complicate Ankara's own initiatives and damage its own interests. In fact, today Turkey sees the United States as the chief destabilizing factor in the Middle East. As a result, there is an increasing prickliness, wariness, and even suspicion across most of the Turkish political spectrum toward U.S. policies and actions.

These frictions are becoming more prominent and have begun to sink into Turkish political consciousness. As evidence, consider the striking results from a survey of Turkish perceptions that was conducted by Turkey's International Strategic Research Organization (ISRO) in 2004:

- The United States ranked as the number one *threat* to Turkey, followed by Greece, Armenia, and Israel. Russia ranked seventh and Iran ninth.
- The United States ranked number seven among the countries friendliest to Turkey.
- As a potential long-term partner for Turkey, the European Union ranked first and the United States fifth, one place lower than the "Islamic world."
- The United States was overwhelmingly ranked number one as the country most believed to threaten to world peace, followed by Israel and the United Kingdom.
- Yet interestingly, the United States ranked number one as the country Turkey could most count on for aid in time of crisis (earthquake, civil war, etc.)¹

This book will argue that Turkey's new search for independence in its foreign policy, however complicating or irritating for the United States, will nonetheless ultimately serve the best interests of Turkey, the Middle East, and even the West. In the coming decade, Turkey—for the first time in its modern history—is becoming a major player in Middle East politics. Its evolving sense of its own identity and increasing recognition of its historical role within the Muslim world is catching the attention of other Muslims, who themselves are beginning to perceive Turkey as a potentially important

1. ISRO, "ISRO Second Foreign Policy Perception Survey," October 2004, www.usak.org.uk.

ally to their own interests. The importance of the Turkish role will likely only grow as authoritarian regimes all across the region slide toward deepening crises of leadership and legitimacy and face eventual collapse.

In such an environment of swirling and uncontrolled change, few Muslim states have successfully or positively undergone such wrenching transition. Indeed, at this point in its history, perhaps only Turkey can demonstrate a positive record on multiple levels: it has managed to enact successful economic policies; it has created a largely stable political order with a tested democracy; it has a vibrant Islamic culture; it has demonstrated an ability to reach some form of reconciliation with political Islam in a way that few other Muslim states have; it has demonstrated a growing realism in the way it treats its own multiethnic problems; it has maintained a close working relationship with the West in the political, economic, and military spheres and continues on a (controversial) course toward EU membership; and it has a strong military and a powerful sense of sovereignty and independence. These are qualities greatly sought after and critically needed by other Muslim societies. As a result, in its new, more independent mode, Turkey is no longer perceived regionally as a mere Western “wannabe”; it is now for the first time being viewed positively within the Muslim world as a state worth watching—and maybe even emulating.

Additionally, with a GDP of \$627 billion in 2006 and a real growth rate currently at 7.4 percent, Turkey’s economy is one of the largest in the Middle East.² And although Turkey is one of the biggest countries of the Middle East, with a population of more than 70 million, its birth rate currently stands at 1.09 percent, meaning the social infrastructure crises that plague so many other developing countries with higher birth rates will likely be avoided.

Turkey also presents a diverse religious and ethnic makeup, similar to many other states in the region such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In religious terms Turkey’s population is 99.8 percent Muslim, but in sectarian terms there is a sizeable (30 percent) Alevi (heterodox Shiite) community that has its own strong sense of communal identity. Additionally, Turkey is distinctly multiethnic: the single largest ethnic minority in the country are the Kurds, who represent roughly 20 percent of the population and speak a non-Turkic language akin to Persian. The Kurdish population has presented the modern Turkish Republic with serious issues of insurgency and separatism, especially in recent decades, but Ankara is slowly learning to manage these issues with more wisdom. While the situation has improved, Turkey’s “Kurdish problem” is far from resolved and is now complicated by the politics of Kurds in post-Saddam Iraq.

2. CIA, “The World Factbook Turkey,” www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html.

Significance of Turkey to the United States

Ever since the founding of the modern Turkish Republic, Turkey's dominant elite has identified itself with the West for strategic, cultural, economic, and psychological reasons. This identification eventually led Ankara to form a close military-strategic relationship with both Europe and the United States, which understood Turkey's geopolitical importance, particularly after World War II with the rise of the Soviet threat. A neighbor to the Levant, the Balkans, Mesopotamia, Iran, and the energy-rich Caucasus, Turkey is a Mediterranean and Aegean power that controls the Bosphorus, the straits that cut through Istanbul, dividing Europe and Asia, and that control Russian egress out of the Black Sea. Turkey's orientation and strategic geography ultimately led to Turkish membership in NATO, and its involvement in Western strategic planning in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea regions.

With the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the rise of political Islam, the West came to prize Turkey's strong secularism and pro-Western commitment. As Islamic movements spread through the Middle East, Turkish government hostility to any form of political Islam contributed to its image as a bulwark against Islamic radicalism. Additionally, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey's ethnic ties with the newly independent Turkic states of Central Asia added to its strategic importance, as did plans to make Turkey a hub for the transit of Caspian and Central Asian oil and natural gas. Around this time, Turkey also intensified its military relations with Israel.

After September 11, 2001, Washington expected Turkey to be a natural partner and source of support in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), to back U.S. military operations in the region, and to continue to be an enduring symbol of anti-Islamist ideology. Yet these expectations did not materialize as Washington had hoped. Indeed, bilateral relations have changed markedly and shown signs of dramatic deterioration in recent years. The reasons behind this change—and the implications of this change for Turkey and the United States—is a key issue explored in this book.

Turkey's Changing Role

Turkey's own role in the Middle East has been rather modest in past decades. But since 2001, its role there has greatly expanded for two key reasons. The first relates to the impact of 9/11 and the subsequent GWOT, which led to U.S. military and paramilitary engagements across large segments of the Muslim world, including on Turkey's doorstep. The second relates to Turkey's 2002 national elections and the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (JDP, or *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* [AKP]), Turkey's own highly moderate Islamist party. Turkey's response to the

GWOT and the emergence of the JDP represent a new stage in the ongoing evolution of Turkey's identity and role in the Middle East, a stage that raises a number of interesting questions:

- What role can or will Turkey play in a period of increasing turbulence and dramatic change in the Middle East?
- What relevance does the election of a moderate Islamist government in secular-minded Turkey have for other Muslim countries? And how does the large, moderate, and largely apolitical Islamist movement of Fethullah Gülen contribute to the development of a new moderate Islam in Turkey?
- Can Turkey's JDP serve as a model or an important body of political experience to the rest of the Middle East?
- How will Turkey's emerging role in the Middle East impact Turkey's membership bid in the European Union?
- What is behind Turkey's growing anti-American attitudes, at both the official and the popular level? How "permanent" is this development and what does it mean for the Middle East?
- What will be the future determinants of Turkish policies in the Middle East, and how will they affect U.S. interests and policies?

The Argument

With these and other questions in mind, a key thesis of this book is that the modern Turkish Republic—after a long period of abnormal isolation from the Middle East and Eurasia—is now in the process of becoming a part of Middle Eastern politics once again. This process is tied to Turkey's growing vision of its new geopolitical place in the world. Thus, the Turkey that the West has grown comfortable with over the past half century actually represents a transient geopolitical aberration from a long-term norm to which it is now returning. While this "return of history" partially dilutes and complicates Turkey's relationship with the West, it also enriches and complements it.

A long succession of U.S. administrations grew comfortable with the "old" Turkey—the faithful, reliable, and strongly pro-Western ally whose interests appeared to differ little from America's, a country that was ready and willing to assist in fulfilling most every U.S. geopolitical goal in the region. But for multiple reasons, we are witnessing a gradual global reaction within the international order that seeks to restore some degree of multipolarity to the world, much at Washington's expense. This trend is related both to global geopolitical changes since the end of the Cold War and the impact of Washington's turn toward more unilateral and hegemonic policies under the administration of George W. Bush. As a result, onetime faithful U.S. allies in many regions of the world can no longer be described as just that. Turkey is part of this trend.

But we are also witnessing a historic trend toward the forging of renewed interrelationships between Turkey and the Middle East. The consequences of this trend are not yet fully clear but are likely to be generally positive for most parties. This trend transcends the vision of the JDP alone and represents a slowly emerging Turkish national consensus of sorts. As a powerful, stable, advanced, and democratic Middle Eastern state, Turkey is now moving—indeed, compelled to move—toward more independent involvement in a troubled region where it has vital interests. In the end, it is the complex interplay between the United States, the European Union, and Turkey's non-Western interests that will define what Turkey does in the Middle East and broader Muslim world.

As an extension of this thesis, this book will also argue that Turkey's relationship with the United States is now in the process of permanently losing much of its earlier closeness for three main reasons. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reordering of European politics removed the primary strategic geopolitical threat to Turkey. Second, at roughly the same time, Washington's regional agenda in the Middle East came to be increasingly perceived as being at odds with Ankara's own interests in the region. Third, Ankara has increasingly developed new strategic openings to the Muslim world, Eurasia, Russia, and China that offer alternative political and economic options to the country. Although these openings have greatly accelerated under the JDP, I view this particular shift as a long-term geopolitical one that will irrevocably change Ankara's links to Washington.

From Washington's vantage point, Turkey is now a much more difficult and independent-minded ally that is far less reliable than it was in previous decades—some might even say it has been lost. To be sure, today Turkey's geopolitics are diversifying, expanding, and coming of age. In the future, therefore, far more complex skills and mutual sensitivities will be required on both sides to better manage and navigate the Turkish-American relationship. This book will examine the implications of Turkey's current trajectory and recent developments within Turkey and across the region for both U.S. and Turkish goals and interests in the Muslim world.

The Organization of the Book

There is an inherent tension between a topical and chronological presentation of a country's evolving identity and strategic outlook, but this book tries to straddle both. The historical legacy of the Ottoman and early Republican (Kemalist) periods are extremely important in revealing two essentially contradictory visions of what Turkey was and is. Therefore, the first part of this book explores these contradictory visions and argues that Turkey's future will represent a fusion of these two powerful legacies. After all, an understanding of the key legacies of Turkey's past is essential

for understanding what the psychological and cultural foundations of the country are—and for understanding where the country is coming from and what its future trajectory might then be.

Specifically, I will identify the key political, cultural, and psychological events that have influenced the tumultuous ride Turkey has experienced over the last hundred and fifty years and that continue to affect Turkish foreign policy thinking. To do so, I will highlight four eras: the late Ottoman era, the Kemalist reform era, the early Cold War era and Turkey's strategic embrace of the West, and the present era in which Turkey has made gradual but accelerating moves toward greater independence in foreign policy.

With this understanding of Turkey's past historical trajectory, I will then examine Turkey's sources of influence and its present relations with the Muslim world. As I will argue, Turkey's relationships with its neighbors are colored by their respective histories, meaning the past continues to have a hold on the present, but there are signs that this is changing. Thus, the middle part of this book addresses some of Turkey's key bilateral relations, such as with Syria, Iraq, Iran, Israel, the United States, and many others, and examines how and why the weight of the past is diminishing.

The last part of this book examines alternative futures for Turkey in the Muslim world, particularly as they affect relations with the United States, the European Union, and power centers in the Middle East and Eurasia. It concludes with a set of policy recommendations for the United States in dealing with an increasingly independent-minded and evolving Turkey.