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Turkey's Turn to Hard Power

By Shlomo Avineri

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The recent surge in Turkey's military actions against the Kurds in northern Iraq is an indication that, somewhat surprisingly but not entirely unpredictably, Turkish foreign policy has undergone a 180-degree turn in less than two years. The Turkish offensive is also an indication that these changes go beyond the current tensions between Turkey and Israel, which are just one facet of much deeper trends.

Just a couple of years ago, after the European Union slammed the door in Turkey's face, Turkey reoriented its policy away from Europe toward its immediate region. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's "zero conflicts with neighbors" approach gave this reorientation its strategic and theoretical foundation.

Opening an impressive new page, Turkey reached out to Armenia, softened its position on Cyprus, tried to draw Iran into a positive dialogue with the West, and initiated peace talks between Syria and Israel under Turkish mediation.

Yet these good-neighborhood policies did not work out as intended. Rapprochement with

Armenia stalled, no significant progress was made on Cyprus, the opening to Iran did not soften the mullahs' position on nuclear development, and the Syria-Israel talks failed. What's more, Turkey's participation in the 2010 flotilla to Gaza — and Israel's brutal response to it — signaled an end to decades of close Israeli-Turkish cooperation.

To top it all off, Syrian President Bashar Assad, ostensibly Turkey's closest new ally, emerged as the most oppressive and bloody regional tyrant. Assad has now spent the better part of 2011 killing his own people as they demonstrate for liberalization and reform.

Notwithstanding these failures, Turkey's strategic stature did not suffer, partly because the diminution of U.S. engagement under President Barack Obama enabled Turkey to fill the ensuing regional power vacuum. The Arab Spring, despite its still-inconclusive outcome, greatly weakened Egypt's role in regional politics and made it possible for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to position Turkey — and himself — as the leader of a Muslim bloc and a model of co-existence between Islam and democracy. Last but not least, the victory of Erdogan's AKP party in recent parliamentary elections has encouraged Erdogan to embrace Putin-esque ambitions.

While Davutoglu's "zero conflict" policy was initially viewed as moderate, it was underpinned by an overarching view of Turkey as the hegemonic regional power — as an arbiter of conflicts, but ultimately also as an enforcer of its own views on lesser players. It may be incorrect to call Turkey's behavior "neo-Ottoman," but some neighboring countries, after expecting a mediator and facilitator, may now feel faced by a possible bully.

Erdogan's policy reorientation vis-a-vis Israel can be understood as an attempt not only to overcome traditional Arab suspicion of Turkey, given its imperial past, but also to present a more moderate Islamic alternative to theocratic Iran and its unpredictable president. But Erdogan's threat to consider using the Turkish navy as a military escort for further flotillas to Gaza already borders on saber-rattling, as does his declared willingness to use force to prevent the Republic of Cyprus from exploring for gas in its continental shelf.

Meanwhile, renewed violent incursions into northern Iraq in pursuit of alleged guerillas suggest a reversion to hard-line anti-Kurdish policies. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq only seems to have encouraged Turkey's will to create a cordon sanitaire on the Iraqi side of the border — and possibly to establish a counterweight to Iran's influence on a Shia-led government in Baghdad. And while Turkey's agreement to host NATO anti-missile radar facilities and its recent seizure of a Syrian-registered arms ship may please the West, these policies are nonetheless focused on "hard" military power.

Similarly, Erdogan's recent visit to Egypt, Libya and Tunisia brings out the ambivalence of Turkey's new claim to regional hegemony. While Egypt's shaky military junta welcomed Erdogan, many Egyptians were not happy about his hectoring them — and other Arabs — to follow Turkish policies and to regard Turkey as their Muslim leader. A new sultanate? Erdogan as the new Saladin?

Turkey has an enormously important role to play in the region. It could be a bridge between the West and the East, between Islam and modernity, and between Israel and the Arabs. But it runs the danger of succumbing to the arrogance of power, which has corrupted and sidelined many strong states in the past.

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