



Roundtable: Kemal Kirisci and Bulent Aras, "Four Questions on Recent Turkish Politics and Foreign Policy"

As part of the MERIA seminar on Turkey, some ideas were exchanged about important recent developments. Here's a summary of some thoughts we hope will be interesting.

1. Barry Rubin, BESA Center and MERIA: Perhaps the rejection of Turkey by European institutions is not just another event in a long series but rather a turning point, the last straw, in a long historical process. It is hard to believe that any future Turkish government will expect success or will really put as much priority, prestige, and as many assets in an effort to gain entry into Europe in the way that has happened in the past. What are the implications of this for policy? We've seen the alliance with Israel attributed to this factor and some intriguing suggestions of more Turkish emphasis on the Far East. The "Islamic" option is foreclosed in the minds of the current leadership, but the Arab world could still be a more important ally even in the mind of those opposing the Welfare Party. The United States could even become more central in Ankara's calculations.

Kemal Kirisci, Bosphorus University and visiting professor, University of Minnesota: Many have concluded that the decisions that emerged from the December 1997 Luxembourg summit of European Union (EU) countries has for all intent and purposes closed the doors to Turkey's membership. I am not sure whether these decisions will, when we look back at them in say five years time, seem that much of a turning point. Clearly, Turkish membership

to the EU is and will remain very controversial. Yet, I am not sure that the Luxembourg decisions amount to an unequivocal closing of the doors to Turkey's ambitions of becoming an EU member. There is quite a bit of difference among European governments on this issue. Some governments such as the German and maybe Scandinavian ones tend to oppose Turkish membership with some rigor, while Mediterranean countries with the exception of Greece take a much less categorical position and seem to prefer to leave the prospects of membership open. In Turkey, on the other hand, there is a growing recognition that Turkish membership to the EU is not some kind of a God-given right.

Instead there is a realization that Turkey needs to tackle and resolve a long series of problems ranging from the Kurdish problem to improving democracy and the rule of law. In a similar manner in many European non-governmental circles there is also an ongoing debate on the future of European identity. A debate on whether Europe is going to have a multi-cultural and multi-religious identity or an identity that will be centered around Christianity. This debate inevitably is deeply linked to Turkish membership to the EU and to Turkey being a Muslim country.

I think Barry is right when he says that government people may not any more

be investing the kind of time, commitment, energy and resources to pushing Turkey's case. Yet, I suspect that Turkey's relations with Europe is going to become even more varied and intense over the coming years.

At the same time, maybe for the first time since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey will become a country that belongs to the many regions that surround it. I think what we will be seeing in the coming years is government circles paying more attention to that. In many ways this trend has already started. The end of the Cold War has brought with it the growth of Turkey's relations with Black Sea and Central Asian countries. I suspect that in the near future there is going to be an effort to develop better relations with at least some of the more moderate Arab countries. There is going to be an attempt to balance some of the advances made in Israeli-Turkish relations. Furthermore, it is highly likely the coming years is going to be characterized also by an increased non-governmental or transnational ties developing with both Europe, as well as, with other regions.

In other words we are going to see more Turks - business people, tourists, students, professionals, academics etc travelling to Europe (in spite of grueling visa procedures) as well as to regions surrounding Turkey. I suspect no region or bloc is going to emerge dominant though maybe relations with the Caucasus and Black Sea countries may weigh a little bit more heavily compared to other regions.

However, at the governmental level there is though at least one project that may be left to die its own death. One of the foreign policy projects that the previous government led by the Islamist Refah party launched was to lead the formation of the D-8 group of countries made up of large Muslim countries. This project that at the time seemed to have been advocated for domestic political reasons had not received

much support from the more established foreign policy circles. It will be interesting to see if the D-8 which held its first summit in 1997 will be able hold another one. How much of it will be because the advocates of the idea in the Turkish domestic political context is not around any more and how much of it will be because the so called Asian tigers slipped into serious economic crises may be difficult to tell at this time. Yet, another argument might be that now that the domestic ideological baggage associated with the project is gone the project might just become one other of the many projects that Turkey, governmental and non-governmental, might pursue.

2. Barry Rubin, BESA Center and MERIA: We might be seeing a heightened European criticism with possible material actions against Turkey on such issues as the Kurds, human rights, Cyprus, etc., which also exceeds what has happened in the past. What are the implications for both Turkey's policy and positions?

Kemal Kirisci, Bosphorus University and visiting professor, University of Minnesota: When after the last British elections a Labor government was formed, there were many who suggested that relations between Turkey and Britain were going to be adversely affected and that Britain was going to introduce tougher policies towards Turkey on issues ranging from the Kurdish problem to the Cyprus problem.

Instead what seems to have happened so far is that Britain's position towards Turkey seems to have oscillated back and forth. This may well be because some Laborites wanting to formulate tougher policies toward Turkey are being calmed down by other interest groups that prefer or need good relations with Turkey. It is difficult to see any significant changes taking place in the near future.

In this respect, the political outcome of a recent court case in Britain will be interesting to follow. Britain's arms sales policy towards Turkey was the subject of a court hearing in February, when five members of the organization, Campaign Against Arms Sales (CAAS), were tried for taking part in a protest in Britain's biggest arms fair in Farnborough in 1997. The same day, petitions, calling for the British government to stop arms sales to Turkey, were delivered to both Prime Minister Tony Blair and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook's offices. (Turkish Daily News, 5 February 1998) Such incidents will probably repeat itself in Britain as well as some of the other EU countries.

However, I do not expect major changes towards Turkey at a time when economic considerations seem to have the upper hand and many seem to underline that economically Turkey is much more promising to the Europeans than many of the prospective new members to the EU. Furthermore, I am not sure that the Europeans are right around the corner from developing a Common Security and Foreign Policy. As long as they cannot they are not going to be able to develop the coordination needed to put pressure on respective Turkish governments. Here too I think trans-national relationships are going to be counter-balance.

The second point is that in Europe there is still this dilemma of not wanting Turkey in Europe but not wanting it out either. This dilemma is not going to leave much room for policies that might be perceived to run the risk of pushing Turkey over the edge or alienating Turkey. (i.e. policies that push Turkey into the corner say on Cyprus leading to domestic dynamics in Turkey effecting the very nature of its politics and alignments). Turkey has a difficult neighborhood to its East and Southeast, there is not going to be much sense in adopting policies that could push

things in a direction that might bring that neighborhood to Turkey's Bulgarian and Greek border.

Joint response to Questions 1 and 2, Bulent Aras, Bosphorus University and Visiting Scholar, Indiana University: Following the recent rejection of Turkey by the European Union institutions, two opposite views were put forward by academics and analysts. First, Turkey may put aside its long-lasting dream and try to find other partners. Second, Ankara may turn to resolve its problems related to Kurdish issue, human right and improving democracy in order to strengthen its position vis-a-vis European schemes. In my view, the recent rejection of Turkey may lead Ankara to follow a more realistic policy line towards the European Union. Namely the target may change. Instead of demanding full acceptance to the EU, foreign policy makers may tend to seek a revised form of custom union in advance and some concessions i.e. funds and technical assistance. I believe many government people have this idea in their minds, even though they hesitate to pronounce it. One may ask if this is not a turning point in one-sided love relations between Turkey and the EU, why did government people respond in an unseen harsh manner? The answer of this question should be sought in domestic politics of Turkey.

Turkey seems equally away from Europe and Islamic world but seems quite close to the U.S., Turkic States and Israel. Both Turkey and Israel have serious problems and the developing relations offer challenges as much as opportunities. From the Israeli perspective, cooperation with Turkey may accelerate her geo-cultural integration to into the region. Additionally, cooperation with Turkey may help to avoid some problems in her attempts to penetrate into the markets of the ex-Soviet Union republics. A flurry of high level visits since 1993 are evidence of increasing relations.

From the Turkish perspective, close relations with Israel may provide easier access to Israeli technology and know-how, and most importantly may serve to Turkish security concerns i.e upgrading weaponry systems and monitoring PKK attempts. The potential economic cooperation areas may emerge related to water, agriculture, and tourism. In addition, many Turks believe that friendship with Israel means support from America.

Beside these advantages developing relations also led to some problems in their international relations. Greece and Armenia condemned Israel for improving relations with Turkey and PKK threatened to attack some Israeli units. On the Turkish side, Ankara has been criticized severely in OIC meeting held recently in Teheran. In terms of Turkey's alienation from the Islamic countries, it is interesting to underline that, during his presidency, Ozal invited and led the OIC in order to take some measures against Bosnian crisis. In recent one, President Demirel left the conference one day early due to harsh criticisms.

After the rejection of European Institutions, Turkey re-remembered the Muslim republics of former Soviet Union. Many, in media and academia, argues that Turkic states are no more in pocket and under the negative impact of domestic politics. The allegations in Susurluk scandal threatened to damage Ankara's relations with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. In Baku, the Azerbaijani capital, a diplomatic note handed to the Turkish Embassy called on Ankara to formally deny allegations linking Azerbaijan's leadership to a Turkish underworld figure.

In the early days of 1998, Azeri leader Aliyev asked several times for active Turkish involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Georgia seeks cooperation with Turkey and one should note that Turkey is number one trade partner of Tbilisi and suicide attempt to Georgian

leader Shevardnadze has clear implications in terms of Turkey's future regional policy. The recent outbreak of political violence calls into question the future of current Armenian regime, and its effects will be felt throughout the region. The peace process will remain dormant as long as Armenian leaders are divided against themselves, and Moscow will retain a major source of leverage in the region. The sooner Ankara shift its focus to new developments, the better prepared it will be for whatever troubles and opportunities lie ahead.

3. Barry Rubin, BESA Center and MERIA: The outlawing of the Welfare party has been widely covered in the Western media. I've seen no mention in the Western media about this being a tactic used repeatedly in the past with several parties. The leaders of Turkey know that this will not make the party extinct, so they are acting to signal the population that they are not backing down on traditional social/political values; warning the Welfare party leaders to be more restrained in the future; trying to frighten off non-hardcore supporters of the party; and warning other parties that anyone who forms a coalition with Welfare will be destroyed politically.

Kemal Kirisci, Bosphorus University and visiting professor, University of Minnesota: On the closure of Refah, I have yet to see much writing in the Western media that carries some sophistication. Take for example the lead article in the Economist in January. Whoever wrote the article did not even bother to get the basic facts right and attributed the present Constitution to Ataturk. When the present Constitution was drawn up and accepted by a referendum Ataturk had been dead for almost half a century. The article argued that Refah voters had become disenfranchised by the decision and compared Turkey to Algeria. I would

argue that this line of argument is either product of very poor and sloppy journalism, or a conspicuous lack of knowledge of Turkish politics or simple ethnocentrism. (Turkey is a Muslim society with a strong military, Muslim societies are alike, so by transformation Turkey must become like Algeria where the military had intervened with politics and triggered the violence since 1992)

With the exception of a hard core ideologically motivated Refah voters I suspect the others will move to the many other political parties they can choose from. On many issues, how different is Refah from the Motherland (ANAP) or even Truth Path (DYP) parties? Was Refah the only political party that catered for voters that may have religious concerns or agenda? The ANAP and DYP political bases have always also included religious constituencies.

Furthermore, like politics elsewhere, voters are going to look for who is more likely to deliver political/economic goods and goodies and move in that direction. In any event, if past Turkish political party history is anything to go by, then Refah will soon emerge in the disguise of a different name and politics will be not very different then what it was before the closure of Refah.

Lastly, I completely agree with the line of thinking behind Barry's questions concerning why "secularists" did what they did. Clearly there was an intention to send an unequivocal message that the game of politics in Turkey is to be played by the rules of the game set essentially by them.

Incidentally, I have one last remark, it was not secularists or the military who closed Refah it was the Constitutional Court. Unless politicians can get their act together and change the Constitution prosecutors will always push, as they have done in the past, for the closure of parties that violate the provisions of the Constitution. What the so called "secularists" and the military did was to create the climate where it became

possible for the prosecutors to seek the implementation of the law. Ironically, that happened because, as many Refah supporters themselves have argued, some members of the party created a conducive environment for it. [For a frank self-criticism see interview with Bulent Ardinc, a prominent moderate member of Refah, in *Milliyet* 22 February 1998."] Otherwise, it would have been very difficult to push for the closure. I believe the pushing of it was political but the actual legal decisionmaking process was very much within a legal framework.

Bulent Aras, Bosphorus University and Visiting Scholar, Indiana University: I believe most Western governments sympathize with Turkish secular elite's and army's attempts to prevent Welfare Party (RP) and its cadre from making Turkey a more Islamic country. However, it seems closing down the party completely led to considerable suspicion on the level of Turkish democracy. The suspicion about Turkish democracy was accentuated by the fact that the leader of party was Prime Minister until six months ago. A dozen of editorial and major newspaper articles criticized Turkey and all mentioned the closure of the party as a serious setback for Turkish democracy. Seemingly, the ban took Turkey further away from the West, not closer. As has been put forward in a recent *Financial Times* article, in only one way have these actions against RP brought Turkey closer to Europe: Erbakan has appealed to the European Court of Human Rights. For the followers of RP, besides discovering the value of European institutions, this occasion gave them a chance to test the European's understanding of democracy and human rights.

Incidentally, even a casual look at the history of opposition movements in Turkey reveals the fact that the ruling elite in the post-Republican period inherited an

almost traditional attitude toward the opposition, dating back to pre-Republican, i.e. Ottoman times. Turkish political culture has an implicit and sometimes explicit enmity toward the opposition due to divisiveness anxiety. The successive governments have adopted this attitude to maintain the tradition of the state precedence over society. The RP -not to mention pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HADEP)- case may well indicate that this trends is still alive and doing well.

It is doubtful that the ban on Refah Party will arrest the development of political Islam in Turkey. There are two-ongoing processes in Turkey: construction of a Turkish style of Islam and Islamization of the Turkish nationalist ideology. There are political and non-political (in terms of party politics) components of this Islamic development in Turkey. In the age of the revival of religion, Turkish state elites increasingly feel the pressure to re-establish the legitimacy link between religion and state, which existed in the Ottoman past. This certainly may reverse one clear-cut characteristic of the republican regime: forgetting the Ottoman past. Otherwise, the current developments may lead to growing anti-Islamic state and military images in Turkey. The followers of RP will continue their influential roles in Turkish politics. Any further problem related to political Islam, should be solved within the democratic and pluralist system.

4. Barry Rubin, BESA Center and MERIA: Finally, the Susurluk auto crash scandal -- which showed apparent cooperation between government officials and criminal terrorists and drug smugglers) has grown immensely in scope. Who will this help and who will it hurt politically? Will there be some impact on public opinion and encouragement on future government restraint and increasing human rights? Is this a lesson of historic

importance in affecting Turkish political structures?

Kemal Kirisci, Bosphorus University and visiting professor, University of Minnesota: Here too my reaction is that I doubt a lot would change overnight. My hope is that this accident and the investigation and public debate that followed it may actually have helped to consolidate an already existing slow and incremental process of holding government, in the broad sense, accountable. Yet, statements made by the prime minister expressing concern that pushing the investigation to its ultimate end might weaken the "state" suggest that not much is going to change. Unless, there is a challenge to this well-entrenched characteristic of Turkish political culture that holds the "state" above the law changes and people come to recognize that it is precisely a state not accountable to the public that is in danger of being weakened, it is difficult to see how things can change.

It is highly unlikely that such a change is going to be precipitated by one big Mercedes running into the back of one truck. For the incremental process of change to maintain itself there will probably have to be many more accidents of the Susurluk kind that will be required. I would argue that if this process of change can be consolidated that will come to constitute one of the most important steps in the directions of Turkey becoming a member of the EU. Such a Turkey would also be a Turkey that would permit a political party like Refah to function.

Ironically, an unreformed Turkey will always see the emergence of political parties that are going to harbor politicians aspiring for radical change often violently. Such a Turkey then will be far away from joining the EU and, to make matters worse, will become a Turkey that will carry some of the more unfortunate traits of Middle Eastern politics to its borders with Europe.

Bulent Aras, Bosphorus University, Visiting Scholar, University of Indiana: The auto crash is hardly a turning point in Turkish history but important in terms of showing a continuous trend. There were and are some groups in the state acting independently to save the state from their imagined enemies. This trend can be dated to Ottoman era i.e. Union and Progress party's activities. In Susurluk case, the enemies were Kurdish businessmen that supported the PKK and some influential underground figures. The crash helped reveal that government officials allegedly aided wanted hitmen and gangs in return for their underground services. Investigation files showed that some politicians, bureaucrats and even officers from the police and military, directly or indirectly, involved in this so-called Susurluk crisis. There is an increasing suspicion that in the last two or three decades illegally formed forces were involved in political assassinations and that they were financed through illegal channels such as drugs and arms.

The official report was publicized with some censure and one should not expect further development since the idea of "saving the state" will overwhelm all other ambitions related to the auto crash scandal. The only positive development may be the explicit discussion of the covered state actions. It also revealed that the existence of a "secret state" which sees itself over all formal institutions of the state. Another factor is that this "secret state" has supporters from backbone institutions of the formal state and may incline to seek its own interests in some cases. The security-first structure of state creates inner cycles within itself and different constellations behave in their perceived way to save state. Then the question remaining open is who will save the people from these savers.