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Turkey's Road to Europe

The "Praetorian" Puzzle and the Search for Direction

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Despite all odds Turkey continues to prepare itself for eventual accession to the European Union. After a noticeable slowdown since 2005, both the pace and scale of constitutional reforms recently gathered new steam, reflecting the resolve of the ruling Justice and Development (AK) party to attain deeper democratization. Yet the journey of the Turkish locomotive to Brussels is bound to be long—the road by no means smooth—and indeed, even painful. The country is in effect transforming itself to a liberal democracy from an essentially “praetorian” state, or one where the military keeps a watchful eye on the civilian administration. Notwithstanding, the reforms are guided primarily by the European Acquis Communautaire, the body of legislation that essentially regulates the accession course.

In this context, Ankara's direction in the near future will depend on its own internal ambiguities and its ability to maintain the fragile equilibrium between secularism, on one hand, and Islamism on the other, with variations of progressive and conservative voices at play even within the ruling AK party. Three considerations are pertinent in this analysis: one is the relative decline of praetorianism; a second is the Turkish society's gradual disinterest in the EU;

and a third is the groping attempt of the state to redefine itself and its role in both regional politics and global affairs. Combined, these dynamics affect the state's image and shape its ties with a host of countries in the wider region, namely the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Praetorianism usually emerges in reaction to endemic political instability that results from the civilian political system's relatively low level of institutionalization. But potential EU members have quite a precedent of emerging from praetorianism and landing in liberal democracy. France was essentially a praetorian state until the stabilization of the civilian political system with the inauguration of the Fifth Republic, which led to the de-politicization of the military. Spain and Portugal similarly only discarded praetorianism in recent memory and yet are now members of the EU.

The Quest for Sustainable Political Stability

In spite of its wide popular support, the ruling AK party came close to political obliteration in 2008, following an abortive attempt to change the law banning headscarves. It barely survived then, but the Supreme Court, echoing hard-liners' concerns over Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's perceived anti-secular policies, issued a strong

warning to both the party and its leader to respect and ensure the country's secular orientation. Notwithstanding, the AK party has been successful in addressing the general welfare, particularly of the middle and lower classes. The Muslim-rooted ruling class is slowly assuming a status of a bourgeois, clearly becoming more prosperous than a few years ago. At the same time, there is a distinct rise in socioeconomic discontents and continuing economic inequalities. Large parts of the lower classes, mainly in Anatolia, are still unable to reap the benefits of the country's sizeable economic growth. Moreover, the secularist bureaucratic elites—including the military—seriously challenge the policies and orientations of the AK party. The litmus test for Turkish democracy, the ongoing “Ergenekon” trial, is a case in point. There is thus a powerful incentive for praetorians to assert themselves yet again. But the stakes are bigger today than they were ever before, not least because of Turkey's path toward the EU.

On another level, certain external developments have energized praetorianism in Turkey, most notably the re-emergence of ethnic conflicts—particularly in areas surrounding the country—which conceivably also impinge upon its own Kurdish issue. Moreover, ongoing tensions in the Middle East and increasing concerns with Iran's nuclear program further heighten the level of uncertainty in the country's immediate neighborhood. Indeed, the praetorian military's sensitivity toward security issues is entirely understandable. After all, this is the preoccupation of any nation's military establishment. In the case of Turkey, however, there is an added dimension to this phenomenon. The Turkish military considers itself not only the guarantor of the nation's security against external foes, but also the authentic guardian of domestic order and tranquility. This is not simply a matter of praetorian arrogation for, as many analysts often note, the Turkish military is the nation's most respected and trusted institution. The Turkish people at large, in an important sense, seem to view the military as the last resort and thus confer upon it the kind of inherent political legitimacy that no other military establishment in the West enjoys.

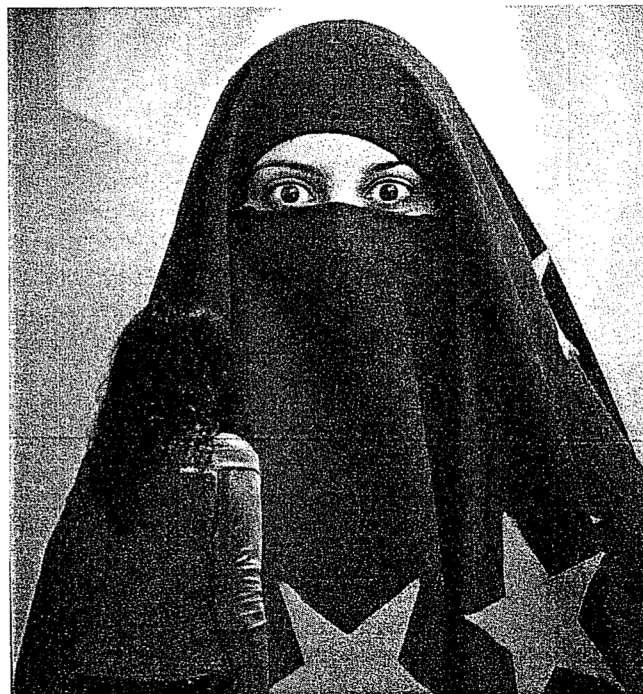
Alienation from the EU and Euro-centrism

By and large, Turks would like their nation to be a member of the EU, and conventional wisdom in Europe and elsewhere holds that they would ultimately do anything expected of them so long as they could join. This is a mistaken notion. Indeed, developments within the accession process itself suggest otherwise. For example, the slowdown of reforms in 2005 and Turkey's reluctance to comply with the EU demand to open its ports, airports, and airspace to vessels registered in Cyprus showed Turkey was not willing to concede recognition of Cyprus for this carrot from the EU. The ambiguity of several EU member states concerning Turkey's eventual accession compounded institutional fatigue and frustration with these sort of reforms. Turkish citizens also react to this perceived ambivalence from some EU nations with growing resentment, subsequently inclining them to be more resistant to EU demands for accession.

The long-touted virtue of EU membership is also being

called into question given recent developments. The ongoing financial crisis has likely contributed to a conspicuous decline in Turkish confidence concerning Western capitalism and democracy. The current pulse of public opinion in the Turkish media reflects a rise in economic concerns, sovereignty questions, and national pride. The costs of membership, such as political and cultural integrity, and also “costly” adjustments to environmental regulations, become increasingly hard to swallow when the financial model Turkey is supposed to emulate has been cast into doubt by intractable economic problems. The public is less likely to accept the costs of a model when it has neither assurances of full accession nor full confidence in that model.

Another factor at work in distancing Turkey from the EU may be traced to the noticeable increase of conservative values, embodied in the emergence of the AK party. This has enabled Prime Minister Erdogan to make strong statements concerning Israel's policies in Gaza with confidence, despite the continuing importance of the strategic partnership that Ankara enjoys with Tel Aviv. This sort of action is part of a larger trend: Morton Abramowitz and Henri J. Barkey recently identified in *Foreign Affairs* that the AK party aims “to consolidate its position in the Muslim world even at the expense of its traditional alliance with the West.” These developments primarily concern Turkey's relationship with the United States and though Turkish foreign policy is unlikely to steer away from its Euro-Atlantic posture, Ankara's “new strategy” is presumably designed to calibrate its profile in the region, highlight its “new role” as an EU player, and better position it to take responsibility for promoting EU strategic



A visitor looks at Burak Delier's artwork of a woman wearing a chador made from an EU flag at an exhibition in Istanbul.

interests in the region.

The complexity and contradictions in Turkey's policies may not be as perplexing as they may often appear to outside analysts. For example, as the authentic (or, at least, self-appointed) guardian of the Kemalist heritage, the Turkish military establishment would conceivably pursue secularism as well as Euro-orientation since they are both regarded as major Kemalist objectives. Both principles, however, may have been misunderstood in the past. To Atatürk and many of his latter-day followers, all such principles except one—Turkish nationalism—are instrumental values intended not for their own sake but with a view to developing and strengthening the Turkish nation in the modern world. Secularism and Euro-orientation are useful only insofar as they serve that larger purpose. It is in this sense that the perceived rise of conservative values should be contemplated.

Arguably, the military has also helped foster the spread of Islamic culture, as a component of Turkish (Muslim) identity. Since the 1980 military coup, public expenditures on religion have vastly been expanded, for example in the construction of mosques and religious schools, as well as the training of religious instructors and prayer leaders. Islamic education has been restored to the nation's schools for the purpose of bridging social and economic divisions in the nation. Religion is used as an instrument of social engineering to the extent that it serves the purpose of building a strong and unified state. Kemalists, military as well as civilian, want the European level of economic and technological capability but undergirded by the "Turkish spirit" of which one critical component is Sunni Islam. Thus, there is no contradiction between Kemalism and any potential non-European or even anti-European direction Turkey might choose to take in pursuit of its national interests.

Turkey's Search for Direction

As long as the EU prospect remains blurred, disillusionment with the West has already begun to drive Turkey in search for an alternative, if parallel, orientation, as well as a new identity and place in international affairs. A great deal of uncertainty and unpredictability seem to accompany this venture. Several initiatives pursued by Ankara suggest a general path toward which Turkey is finding its place in the sun. One such initiative relates to the Turkic republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Ankara's overture has elicited some tangible results, since its efforts are largely welcomed by the republics' heightened ethnic awareness and cross-border economic expectancy. Those Turkic republics comprise some 61 million people, nearly equal to Turkey's own population, as well as considerable petroleum and other natural resources. Citizens of these republics are largely Sunni Muslim, as are most Turks themselves. The region undergoes rapid economic development and provides attractive ventures of entrepreneurial activities. As of 2008, Turkish investments were in the order of over 15 billion dollars; in the same period, at least 15,000 students from these countries graduated from Turkish universities.

Henry Kissinger's thesis with respect to the shifting

center of gravity eastward can apply to Ankara's seemingly realist calculations, much like the major powers in Asia have done. Geopolitics, he argues, "is the basis of their internal analysis and their external actions" in a July 9, 2004 article of the *Washington Post*. Likewise, Zbigniew Brzezinski asserts that, given its special interests in Central Asia and its NATO membership, Turkey "could perhaps play a key role in exploring a cooperative arrangement between NATO and [the Shanghai Cooperation Organization]." Indeed, he views this cooperation as gradually evolving to "a joint NATO-SCO council" in which Turkey's eastern orientation, short of EU membership, seems to be both logical and timely, "given the changing distribution of global power and the eastward shift in its center of gravity." Thus, it does seem quite apparent that Turkey is attempting to cultivate new alliances in pursuit of both political and economic objectives, including energy security.

What Would this Portend for the Future?

These developments seem to suggest that Turkey may eventually gravitate more eastward, without necessarily abandoning the Euro-Atlantic sphere of influence, the NATO alliance, or Western style market economics. In this respect, there are several reasons for tentatively concluding that, conceivably, a number of issues (e.g. Kurdish and Cyprus questions) might remain unresolved or that there is, at least for the time being, no alternative to the status quo. One reason is that, to the extent that Turkey is seeking a leadership role in the region and in any of the groupings of Islamic states, it cannot afford (a) to compromise its unity by granting excessive rights and/or autonomy to the Kurds; (b) to accept a Kurdish state along its border with Iraq, as this may have a spill-over effect internally; and (c) to give up on Cyprus, not least because of the island's significant geo-strategic position in the Eastern corner of the Mediterranean, only 40 miles from the Turkish coast.

In this respect, the contradictions inherent in Ankara's domestic and foreign policy orientations are inevitable, albeit conceivably manageable. By logical extension, the praetorian role of the Turkish military, though arguably diminished, is likely to be maintained for as long as the nation's internal conditions and external exigencies remain fluid and unpredictable. The military has traditionally assigned itself, and much of the public has assigned to it, a stabilizing and restorative role as the nation's most authoritative institution. Its ultimate mission is to defend the nation from external dangers and from domestic disorder which, as the praetorian military, it can and does interpret with extreme latitude.

Conclusions and Policy-Relevant Options

Martti Ahtisaari, former president of Finland, Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 2008, and chairman of the Independent Commission on Turkey, put it succinctly in an editorial in the September 10, 2009 issue of the *New York Times*: "On a cold Helsinki day in December 1999, EU leaders declared Turkey to be a candidate state destined to join the Union on the basis of the same criteria as applied to the other



Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu meets with EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn at a EU-Turkey foreign ministers gathering in Brussels on May 19, 2009.

candidate states. Today... Turkey's destiny seems far less certain." While underlying the "remarkable transformations" achieved in the period 2000-2005 by enacting human rights laws, abolishing the death penalty, and reforming the penal system, Ahtisaari observes that Ankara thus far "amended a third of the country's authoritarian constitution." Indeed, the remaining reforms may pose a potentially great puzzle, both for the EU and Turkey itself—not to mention the praetorian military.

The question arises, therefore, whether or not the continuing pace of change is sustainable. In other words, how many more transformations, how quickly, and at what political price are the civilian elite, the military, and the people themselves willing to acquiesce? In spite of significant constitutional reforms, the military still effectively guarantees stability and order, not least because Turkish democracy is not always, in Ahtisaari's words, "comfortable in its own diversity." Indeed, under these circumstances, quick and unsustainable change for the sake of EU accession may well bring about undesirable consequences. Nonetheless, Turkish officials have been eager to underline that reforms are desirable if only because they are beneficial for the country and the people and, as such, they are determined to pursue them further.

Undoubtedly, accession negotiations have provided the country with the best inducement to engage in a serious introspection and, ultimately, they may prove to be the only sustainable option for the transition of the Turkish political system, namely its evolution from a "praetorian" to a "liberal" democracy. To get there, however, the Turkish leadership must seriously consider the unanticipated consequences of reforms or policy decisions that are either unpopular or, simply stated, not perceived to be in Turkey's "national interest." For example, two major policy objectives

should be realized, concurrently, without risking disorder and backtracking. The first policy objective is to ensure the smooth and full implementation of ongoing and future reforms so that they comply with the European *Acquis Communautaire*. The second involves resolving at least two serious political obstacles that stand on the way to full accession, namely granting more rights to its Kurdish population and meeting the obligations of the Ankara Protocol with respect to the Cyprus question. Otherwise, EU member states are unlikely to give their stamp of approval for the final verdict on the country's EU accession.

Turkish politicians, diplomats, and academics often seriously question whether accession negotiations will ever lead to EU membership; yet they do admit

that the process itself is worth pursuing, regardless of the final outcome, precisely because they have set in motion long awaited reforms. A successful policy outcome would be to achieve all major goals. The first of these goals is the completion and full implementation of the reform process, an objective that arguably both the administration of Erdogan and the Kemalist (military) establishment support, at least in principle. Second is the full accession to the EU by reforming the country into a liberal democracy and consolidating the "zero problems" policy with its neighbors, including Armenia, with which a major step forward has already been undertaken. Finally, a more complex set of issues must be contemplated internally with respect to the Kurds and externally with two of its future partners in the EU, Greece and Cyprus. An eventual and mutual agreement would be a win-win scenario for all parties concerned. But it would require foresight and, at a minimum, a critical reappraisal of the national interest in a way that it seriously accounts for, and is sensitive to, the national interest of other players. This presupposes new perspectives, even if political realism and power politics remained relevant, as it were. In other words, the main elements of a "post-modern" (European) state should be gradually incorporated in this new and forward looking policy, slowly abandoning the traditionalist and static model of "authoritarian political style" which, according to Robert Cooper's post-modern theory, is "ill-designed for promoting change." ■

Author's note: this essay is in memory of a great mentor, Dr. Taketsugu Tsurutani, Professor (Emeritus) of Political Science at Washington State University and the International Christian University, Tokyo.