

Inaugural Turgut Ozal Memorial Lecture

Nov 11, 1997



Brief Analysis

During the Cold War, Turkey played a vital role as the southeast bastion of NATO. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, a new configuration in the Middle East has emerged, one that has actually increased Turkey's importance in the region.

The collapse of the Soviet Union not only brought about the end of the Cold War, but the end of an era of domination of the Middle East by outside powers that began with Napoleon's conquest of Egypt nearly 200 years ago; while the actors changed over the years, the script was much the same throughout. Neither of the two final contenders now play the imperial role: the Russians, because they cannot, and the Americans, because they will not.

The people of the Middle East now, more than ever before in the past two centuries, have responsibility for the conduct of their own affairs. There are some vestigial outside interests, but they are diminishing, and it is likely that the time will come in the not too distant future when the outside world will look at the Middle East with indifference. Most Middle Eastern governments, however, are continuing on the dubious assumption that the outside world cares greatly what happens to them and intends to impose its will on them.

The Natural Limits of the Middle East. The other major change that has taken place in the region as a result of the collapse of the Soviet empire is that the Middle East has returned to its historical boundaries. The Transcaucasian and Central Asian republics, historically and culturally part of the Middle East, are part of the emergence of a "Turkic world." This development parallels the emergence of what is called "the Arab world" after the break-up of the Ottoman, British and French empires. Like the Arab world during its post-Imperial rise, the emerging Turkic world has had problems disentangling itself from its previous imperial rulers and is going through a difficult period of adjustment to sovereign independence. The Turkic world is one in which Turkey, as the sole long-established sovereign state, will play a key role.

Alternative Futures for the Region. Since the death of Egyptian President Nasser, there has not been a single Arab leader with anything to offer other Arab countries; Nasser was the last great pan-Arab leader. What we have seen since has been a variety of rulers and governments who are able to compel sometimes reluctant obedience in their own countries but have failed to win much respect or esteem anywhere else in the Arab world. During the past half-century, the states of the region have gone through many convulsions-struggles with outside powers and struggles within-but two ideas dominated the region during that period: nationalism and socialism. Both ideologies are of European origin and both have long outlived any usefulness they may have had. Socialism is discredited by its failure, nationalism is outdated by its success. There are two countries in the Middle East that offer models for the future: the democratic Republic of Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Turkish democracy and Iranian theocracy represent rival diagnoses of what is wrong with Middle Eastern and Islamic societies and rival prescriptions for putting it right.

Democracy Versus Theocracy. Turkish democracy must be viewed in its context. It must be seen for its astonishing achievements compared with virtually any other state of the same historical and cultural background; it should not be compared with the advanced democracies of the Western world. Turkish democracy has been experiencing and

will continue to deal with the challenge of Islamism and the Iranian model of theocracy. In the last Turkish elections, approximately 20 percent of the Turkish electorate seemed willing to adopt the Iranian model by voting in favor of the Refah party and Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan. While we are unable to know the extent to which the Iranian electorate would prefer a democratic system, the recent presidential election in Iran brought something considerably less than a ringing vote of confidence in the current regime.

While the Turks have chosen to lead by unintended example, the Iranians are making a conscious effort to disseminate their message to the rest of the Islamic world. Moreover, the Islamist cause has certain obvious advantages in this competition. It uses familiar language and themes and appeals to feelings and instincts deeply rooted in the society. This ideology also appeals to wounded pride in a country and region that feels history has taken a wrong turn and has reversed the natural situation in which Islam prevails above all else. The democratic advantage is less obvious; its language is unfamiliar, its values are imported, but it nevertheless has important assets. First, for women, democracy offers a future that theocracy would deny them. Ataturk saw this very well in the 1920s and argued that Turks would never catch up with the modern world if they only modernized half the population. Second, thanks to modern communications it is becoming increasingly difficult, and will soon be impossible, to maintain the kind of thought control necessary for an autocratic regime. This is perhaps the best guarantee of freedom in Turkey and ultimately the rest of the region.

Turkey and the European Union. In 1693, the famous William Penn published a book calling for a union of European states; remarkably for his time, he said that the Turks should be included in this union-provided that they adopted Christianity. Turkey faces some similar attitudes today in its bid for acceptance as a full member of the European Union (EU). The rise of political religious movements in Turkey has only provided more ammunition for those that oppose Turkey's admission to the EU. Ironically, rejection by the European Union would strengthen the hand of the anti-Western, pro-Islamic fundamentalists in Turkey. Under the circumstances, the best course for Turkey would be to seek closer integration with the European Union in every respect short of formal integration; a great deal has already been accomplished in this respect, but there is more that can be done.

Turgut Ozal's Legacy. The late Turgut Ozal is a man who in many ways must be regarded as the second great founder of the Turkish Republic. His achievements are comparable in many ways to those of Ataturk himself. One of Ozal's great contributions was to Turkey's laik (secular) tradition, because he had an intimate understanding of the religious questions that trouble Turkey and the rest of the region. He was able to show that separation of Church and State is perfectly compatible with personal piety. A secular state need not, in any sense, be anti-religious; a doctrine of separation is intended to protect both religion and politics, not just politics.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Eytan Fisch.

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Simon Henderson

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