

Turkey:

Peace at Home, Peace Abroad?

Aug 12, 1997



Brief Analysis

The actions of former Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan caused chaos in the formulation and implementation of Turkish foreign policy, concern in the West, and a higher profile for the half-military National Security Council (and the military itself) in the policymaking process. Erbakan and Tansu Ciller, former deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, each attempted to steer Turkey's foreign policy in opposing directions, leaving in their wake a "pathetic and contemptible" policy. Ciller, in many instances, exploited Turkish foreign policy to garner domestic political support and put her own self-interest in front of Turkey's. Erbakan acted impulsively on many occasions - for example, visiting Libya and Iran - to satisfy the radical portion of his electorate. In the process, he undermined his goal of deepening connections with the Arab world by alienating moderate Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan. Over the years, Turkey has received little support from the Arabs. The Islamic Conference did not side with Turkey on the Cyprus issue, and when the Bulgarian communist government oppressed Bulgarian Turks in the 1980s, the Arab world did not "even move its little finger." Ironically, Erbakan was the leader to sign agreements with Israel - a great humiliation for him, but an alliance that has become an important dimension of Turkish foreign and security policy. Israel is now "a natural ally" of Turkey, and there is "a perfect understanding" of this in the Turkish public.

The new government of Mesut Yilmaz is faced with the task of restoring and rationalizing Turkish foreign policy. This government's program, recently approved by the Turkish parliament, rejects the earlier government's dogmatic approach, underlines the modern character of the Turkish state, and indicates that Turkish foreign policy will again acquire its "traditional wisdom," consistency, and rationalism. It aims to establish Turkey as a regional power, one that takes the lead in creating regional cooperation and solidarity. The program also envisions the development of Turkish ties with the United States, Europe, and the countries of the Pacific rim. A top foreign policy objective is for Turkey to become a full member of the European Union as early as possible; this includes the consolidation of the customs union, which constitutes the final pre-membership stage of the Turkish-European Union association agreement. The defining factor in this government's program is its advocacy of democratization and human rights; this is the part that - if fulfilled - would truly set this government apart from its predecessors.

The Cyprus Question. The West has taken two different approaches to the Cyprus issue. On one hand, the UN Secretary General and Cyprus mediators from various countries, including the U.S., have attempted to get the two Cypriot communities to agree to a federal state structure for the future of Cyprus. On the other, the European Union (EU) Commission recently announced that negotiations for full membership for the Greek Cypriot community will be initiated soon. Unfortunately, this EU initiative renders the inter-communal negotiating effort meaningless. Certain of EU membership, the Greek Cypriots have no motivation to negotiate seriously with the Turkish Cypriots.

The EU initiative is a violation of Article Two of the 1960 tripartite (Greek-Turkish-British) Treaty of Guarantee, which prohibits Cyprus from integrating with any country or group of countries that does not include both Turkey and Greece. Recent statements of Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit indicate that if EU-Greek Cypriot

membership talks begin, Turkey will respond by initiating the integration of Northern Cyprus with Turkey. This is a reaffirmation of a declaration made by Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktas and Turkish President Suleyman Demirel on January 20, 1997 and the subsequent unanimous endorsement of that declaration by the Turkish parliament. The strategic importance of Cyprus to Turkey, ignored by previous governments, is appreciated by the Yilmaz coalition, which will not stand idle and watch the planned Greek Cypriot acquisition of Russian S-300 surface-to-air missiles, a direct threat to Turkish security. Regarding bilateral Greek- Turkish relations, the recent joint declaration issued in Madrid could initiate a new era of friendship and cooperation; the United States played a vital role in this success. Turks hope that this will not be yet another "ephemeral spring" in Greek-Turkish relations.

SEDAT ERGIN: THE DOMESTIC FRONT

Malaise of Corruption. The widespread corruption in Turkey is the most pressing problem facing the Yilmaz government. Corruption is eroding the fabric of society; it begins at the top and spreads throughout all layers of the bureaucracy. Overhauling the system and eliminating its deficiencies can be accomplished by subscribing to the supremacy of law. This, however, will be a difficult task for a few reasons: forcing the limits of the law has become the norm in Turkey, practiced by politicians, state officials, and ordinary citizens alike; the judiciary cannot function because of its greatly diminished credibility; and there is corruption within Parliament, the same body that is charged with enacting change. The system does not have a mechanism to cleanse itself; unless one is created, the system will continue to fail. The clean records of both Yilmaz and Deputy Prime Minister Ecevit can be a source of optimism, however. Also, it appears that the new coalition has the political will to take at least initial steps to improve the situation.

Educational Reform. Great importance should be placed on educational reform, because it will determine Turkey's future. Turkey currently has a dual-track educational system: regular state-controlled schools committed to secular values and a Western orientation, and religious schools that believe that Islamic principles should play a major role in defining and regulating social life and the legal system. As a result, this educational system produces two different groups of students with opposing aspirations and visions. Left unchallenged, the duality of the system will be a source of greater tension in the future. The new coalition government is determined to address this problem; the cabinet has approved a new bill to introduce eight-year compulsory secular education, which parliament is expected to pass.

Unification of the Center-Right. The present coalition marks a new era in Turkish politics as a catalyst leading to the unification of the Turkish center-right. The main source of political instability in Turkey has been the ongoing rivalry between the two center-right parties, Yilmaz's Motherland Party (MP), and Ciller's True Path Party (TPP). Now the "tie" is broken, with Yilmaz the winner, and the alliance between the MP and Husamettin Cindoruk's Democratic Turkey Party (DTP) has become the new center of gravity in the center-right. Already shrinking rapidly, the TPP will continue to erode as long as Ciller is in charge: she has a grave credibility problem stemming from her corruption charges and her broken pledge never to coalesce with Erbakan; she has lost the big cities; and the MP and DTP will most likely join forces in preparation for the next election. Despite Erbakan's fall from power, his Welfare party, in one form or another, will continue to be a significant factor on the political scene. However, the unification process in the center-right could help overcome the problems the Welfare party, or its successor, may pose for the political system in the future.

The Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Eytan Fisch.

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