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## **Turkey and the Middle East**

**The re-emergence of Turkey as a regional player in the Middle East –  
and its potential new role regarding Europe**

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**Essay by Rainer Hermann**

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# Turkey's divisions: Not about religion, but about class and ideology

A Turkey at peace with herself and her neighbours – unthinkable even a few years ago. Even the unthinkable gets sometimes true.

Inside Turkey, the Kurdish initiative of Erdogan's AKP government might be a prelude to solve this long lasting conflict, and the return of the 97 year old Ertugrul Osmanoglu to Istanbul, where he died and was buried next to the reform sultan Mahmud II, might be a further indication that the Turkish Republic is reconciling with the Ottoman Empire.

In the neighbourhood, too, the government defines today policy and not any longer the formerly almighty security apparatus. Better relations with Syria, Northern Iraq and finally with Armenia open, in addition to the domestic Kurdish initiative, the door for the development of impoverished Eastern and South-Eastern Anatolia.

A Turkey at peace with herself and her neighbours is a relief for Turkey and an opportunity for Europe. Eastern Anatolia could become a small China at the doorstep of Europe. Labour is there cheap, massive fertile lands are available, incentives lure foreign investors into the region which only needs peace and stability to prosper. Before the outbreak of the subprime crisis the Turkish government had started vast projects to upgrade to miserable infrastructure in East and South-East Anatolia. Companies from the UK, and Italy, Russia and Israel and the rest of the world have designed huge projects, mainly in the sectors of agro-industry and energy. Sooner or later large scale foreign direct investments will flow into the region. Then Turkey's poorhouse will flourish, and the German-Austrian choir on the danger of Turkey being a bottomless pit will have to be sung pianissimo.

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The transformation of Turkey has only started. Inside Turkey polarisation persists, even if reduced. On hardly any other country opinions differ as widely as on Turkey. There are, on one hand, conflicting views on the foundation of the republic. It is still mainstream to argue, for Turkey to become a modern country, it was necessary to break with the Ottoman Empire, create an authoritarian state and cut discontinuities. In the West scholars like Bernard Lewis and Stanford Shaw represent this line of thought. A different line, however, emerged with the past years. It stresses the continuities of concepts, persons and institutions from the Empire into the Republic. According to them the only issue that changed was the basis of legitimacy which switched from Islam to the nation-state.

There are also conflicting views on Turkey's present. For some, the western orientation of the country and a European life-style are in danger when the military loses its grip and when there is too much democracy. Those prefer the military having an active political role to safeguard their life-style. For others, the dynamics of society and the recent EU-induced political reforms create a vital democracy with a colourful society. Turkey is divided along these two lines Turkey, the same applies for Europe's look on Turkey.

### **A history of tensions**

In my paper I will focus on the ideological struggle that kept Turkey busy and vulnerable for more than a ¾ century. Tensions are a leitmotif. They were the result of the transition from the imperial and multiethnic Ottoman Empire to the small nation-state of the Republic. Later additional tension had been created by the transition from a one-party-state to Turkey's experiment with democracy.

The democratisation of Atatürk's principles lasts since more than ½ century. The approach of the founding fathers of the Republic, who had been mainly generals, was to modernise the society from above with the means of the state elite (military, bureaucracy, judiciary). This elite remained the same in the Empire and in the Republic. State and society had been equated, the individual had to serve the state. Atatürk's six founding principles had been: Turkish nationalism and laicism, republicanism and etatism, revolutionism and populism. The latter means that the society's only raison d'être is to help the state to fulfil its modernisation policy. Democracy was not included.

However, the history of the Republic is not a history of compliance but a history of revolts against these principles which became a corset. The Kurds revolted against Turkish nationalism, the pious Muslims against laicism (since Islam became a political instrument to form the Turkish nation, but was to be excluded from being a force in society), the liberals against the equation of state and society, the leftists against the assumptions there are already no more classes.

The reforms of the past years have challenged the Kemalist legacy: Some cautious minority rights had been given to the Kurds, more religious freedom beyond pure freedom of belief was made possible. The liberalisation triggered a dynamic development of the society with a vital civil society. The weight of the government which is legitimised by elections increases at the expense of appointed institutions as military, judiciary, bureaucracy.

### **The legacy of the Young Turks**

Atatürk's thinking was not novel. It had been shaped by the nationalist movement of the Young Turks whose triumvirate of the three pashas had taken finally power in 1913. Their thinking was a product of the nationalist intoxication of their time which saw the

defection of Ottoman provinces in the Balkans and in the Arab world. The Young Turk's legacy was fivefold:

- In Stambul, Saloniki and Smyrna, where they mainly came from, they witnessed the modern life-style of the Christian bourgeois. They wanted to live like them, wanted to dress, live, dance like them, amuse themselves like them, and so they equated Westernisation purely with life style.
- The Young Turks copied the Christians, but they also fought them: In the Balkans they fought them with an illegal guerrilla (the voluntary fedailer) which became later the backbone in their domestic fights against "internal enemies". Enver Pasha founded the secret "teskilât-ı mahsûsa" which did the dirty work against Armenians in 1915. In the Republic the teskilât merged with the intelligence MIT.
- The Young Turks did not want to reconquer the Balkans, but identified Anatolia as the habitat and homeland for their new Turkish nation. So there had to be an ethnic cleansing of the Christian Greeks and Armenians. They were replaced by Muslims from the Balkans and Caucasus.
- The officers wanted to save and reconstruct the state. The state was elevated above society, and this strong state needed a strong army.
- Who conducts a revolution has to fight permanently counter-revolutions. The fights against "separatists" (Kurds) and "reactionaries" (Muslims) continued later throughout the Republic.

### **The goal of a "contemporary civilisation"**

Equipped with this legacy, the founding fathers of the Republic wanted to create a "contemporary civilisation" (çağdaş medeniyet). Their model was Europe of the 1920's. Since the founding fathers looked inward, they did not follow Europe's development, their thinking stayed authoritarian. Backbone of the cadres of the new republic became officers and intellectuals from the Young Turks.

Atatürk and his officers faced a peculiar situation: Their victory in the war of independence had created a state, but this state did not have a nation. The multiethnic Ottoman Empire had collapsed, a Turkish nation did not exist yet. To form this nation, they formulated the six principles. Since 1935 they are the logo of the state party CHP which governed Turkey solely until 1950. Where ideology does not allow diversity, one party is sufficient.

The two most important principles had been Turkish nationalism and laicism. Turkish nationalism answered the question who shall be considered to be a Turk. The population exchange with Greece signed January 30, 1923 was the basis. It defined any Muslim on Turkish and Greek soil a Turk, any Christian however a Greek. The final definition occurred in the Peace Treaty signed July 24, 1923 in Lausanne. It defined the Christians and Jews in Turkey as minorities, but not the Muslim Kurds. Later the Kurds were treated as Turks who had forgotten their native Turkish language.

Laicism was the answer on how to deal with Islam. Islam became the defining factor for shaping the Turkish nation. Therefore the state had to control religion and did so by the religious authority Diyanet. Islam had to be eliminated from public space, too. Atatürk closed tarikats and tekkes, religion was equated with superstition. Atatürk put thick layers of ice over religious life. Some decades later, during the experiment with democracy, the ice was about to melt.

From the very beginning of the Republic a formative feature had been, that the urban elite wanted to “civilise” the uncivilised rural people. In an article published in 1973 Şerif Mardin had analysed the relations between Turkey’s centre and periphery. He concluded that this was the most important rift in Turkey’s society. Contrary to Europe, where the centre always had integrated challenges originating from the periphery (feudal aristocracies with their militias, independent cities, the emergence of proletarian labour), neither the Ottoman Empire nor the Republic ever undertook serious initiatives to integrate the Anatolian periphery. The urban elite looked down and despised the rural people. However, that started to change with the elections of 1950, and the process of integration should last more than half a century.

### **The military’s national-security-state**

Atatürk died in 1938, he was succeeded by İsmet İnönü who accepted after World War II the introduction of a multi-party-system. The US had put up pressure to do so, and Turkey was more afraid by Stalin’s expansionism than by some new parties. For the status quo could easily be defended by the available instruments of the old elite.

The election of 1950 was the watershed. The CHP received 40 per cent of the votes, the DP founded by four dissidents from the CHP 53 per cent of the votes and 84 per cent of the seats. Turkey’s experiment with democracy started. Before the election the CHP had loosened its authoritarian policy on religion. That was not enough. The CHP lost, and the thick layers of ice over Turkey’s society started to melt slowly. The new government introduced some religious freedom and market economy. However, it misunderstood democracy as the rule of the majority over the minority; the economic situation deteriorated significantly. The government reacted by declaring state of emergency. Students and young officers revolted. On May 27, 1960 the military intervened. A new constitution re-established the Kemalist principles and introduced new institutions: besides a constitutional court and a State Planning Organisation mainly the National Security Council. From now on the Military Command was officially a player in politics. For the Republic had to be defended against its domestic enemies: the Kurds and the Islamists.

A difference was made from now on between state politics and party politics. The military, judiciary and bureaucracy decided “state politics” on topics as the minorities, religion, Europe, Cyprus and the Armenians. These pillars of the state safeguarded that the sacred principles nationalism and laicism were not touched. For the political parties only economic politics was left. This was the field they could compete in. Turkey was

formally a democracy. However, the institutions of the state took care that the guard rails were not moved. In case it might happen, the military staged coups, the judiciary closed political parties, and bureaucracy watered down reforms.

The competences of the National Security Council increased from decade to decade. The state and its institutions were obsessed with “national security” to protect the purity of the Atatürk’s principles. After the coup d’état of 1980 all political parties were disbanded. The new constitution of 1982 increased the political role of the army even further, the autonomy of the universities was abolished so that “the students are kept connected to Atatürk’s revolution and principles”. However, in the election of 1983 the voters brought Turgut Özal’s newly established Motherland-Party (Anap) to power which the military did not favour.

### **The society is changing**

Turkey had started to change. Two factors became relevant. Firstly, the rural exodus after World War II. Agriculture became mechanised with funds from the Marshal Plan, industry started to prosper under the new DP government. The rural population was uneducated, poor, pious. From now on, however, they lived in shantytowns (“gecekondu”), which grew in concentric circles around the big cities, next to the educated, prosperous and not so much in religion interested city dwellers. Today more than 70 per cent of the Turks live in cities. The cities are a success story how to integrate the rural population. But the migrants kept their conservative background in the new environment.

Secondly, a new middle class emerged. Özal liberalised the economy further, and industrialisation started in Anatolia. Turks started to talk proudly about their “Anatolian tigers”. Industrialised Anatolian cities became export-oriented and competitive. A new middle class benefitted from Turkey’s opening. Conducive was a popular work-ethics, labelled by many “Islamic Calvinism”. I met not few successful businessmen who told me work is for them the highest form of ibadet.

Two blocks faced each other. The Turkish sociologist Nilüfer Göle calls them “the white Turks” and “the black Turks”. The white Turks are the traditional urban elite who controlled the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. They listen to Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos and organise New Year’s Eve balls, they have studied in Oxford and Harvard, they are multilingual and urbane, but they are not interested in religion. The black Turks are the members of the new Anatolian middle class. They listen to the melancholic Arabesk melodies and do not drink alcohol, the women cover their heads. They are pious. And they are the majority. In the 1950’s Istanbul’s CHP-governor Fahrettin Gökay, a typical white Turkey, lamented: “The citizen cannot swim anymore, because the people pour on the beaches.”

Liberalisation did not stop with economics. Turgut Özal started to complement the economic liberalisation drive by a political one. In 1987 he applied to the EU for

membership. In 1996 a Customs Union with the EU came into effect, and Turkey changed some articles in the Republic's authoritarian constitution. Then, intellectuals who supported Özal initiated a debate on a democratic "Second Republic". In this debate secular liberal thinkers for the first time had contact with new Islamist intellectuals who – as urban intellectuals, too – had started a new Islamist discourse. However, this effort was too early and stayed without success.

### **The nineties, a lost decade**

On the contrary, the republic became for some while more repressive. In 1984 the Kurdish guerrilla started a war against the Turkish state. The state grasped the opportunity to prevent changes and reforms. During the war more than 30.000 people were killed, and the army evacuated 3.000 villages.

In the nineties the income per capita remained constant, after it had tripled in the 1980's. Turkey fell behind. In 1923 Turkey still had the same income per capita as Japan, in 1945 the same as Korea. In the nineties politics was unstable. Governments, which plundered the state, lasted rarely longer than a year. The state institutions resisted any changes.

In 1996 the Turkish public became aware that the state cooperated with the mafia to liquidate - in the tradition of the Young Turks - "internal enemies". This bitter finding started an erosion in the state's credibility. Catchword is "Susurluk". Close to this Anatolian city a high ranking police officer and the leading godfather were killed in an accident, a member of Parliament survived in the same car.

The erosion accelerated, when the state proved incapable of helping after the devastating earthquake in August 1999. Finally, the financial crisis of 2001 triggered the deepest economic crisis since 1923. The state was nearly bankrupt with a budget deficit of 17 per cent of the GDP because politicians and greedy businessmen – all white Turks - robbed persistently the treasury. The taxes did not cover any longer the interest payments. The International Monetary Fund had to step in. A package of 15 structural reforms separated politics from economics. Economics could start again. But the depleted and exhausted Republic needed a new start, too.

### **The ideological division: Kemalists versus Post-Kemalists**

In the election of November 2002 the ancient regime imploded. The voters punished the old political parties. None of those who had been in the parliament returned. The newly founded AK Parti won 34 per cent of the votes and an absolute majority of seats. The CHP returned after absence of four years to the parliament. The founders of the AK Parti had been raised in Turkey's Islamist movement. But during the nineties a split occurred between the "modernisers" close to Istanbul's mayor Erdogan and the "traditionalists" close to the movement's founder Erbakan. The "modernisers" founded in August 2001 the AK Parti, and they entered the election of 2002 not with Islamist slogans but with the

project of bringing Turkey closer to Europe, of freeing the society from the state and of generating an economic dynamics. First they kept word.

The change was obvious in the person of the prime minister. The last prime minister before 2002 was Bülent Ecevit, a classical white Turk. His father was a medical professor and member of Parliament, his mother a well known painter, the son studied in London and translated Indian poetry. The ageing Ecevit was followed after a short intermezzo with Abdullah Gül by the young Tayyip Erdogan, himself a classical black Turk. His father had migrated penniless from Rize to Istanbul to start there a new and better life.

Two ideological traditions confront each other. On one hand the “Young Turkish-Kemalist” tradition focuses on the creation of a homogeneous Turkish nation through the state. According to this tradition every Turkish citizen has but one identity, the Turkish one. The Ottoman post-kemalist tradition however ties modern Turkey to the diversity and tolerance of the Ottoman Empire. Erdogan himself had suggested that besides the main identity as a Turk (üst kimlik) every one should be entitled to have a sub-identity (alt kimlik) such as being a Kurd or an Armenian.

### **The social division: urban elite versus Anatolian middle class**

Turkey is divided. The dividing line is not about Islam and religion. The conflict is basically a social one, and “Islam” is just a pretext used to discredit the political opponent. Indicative is an empirical study conducted by the social scientist Hakan Yilmaz from Istanbul’s Bosphorus University analysing the voting behaviour in the election of 2007. His finding was that those who consider themselves urban upper class had voted in majority for the former state party CHP; they are hard-line laicists, Euro-sceptics and pessimistic about their future. However, the new middle class of Anatolia and their descendants in the cities voted in majority for the AK Parti. They are secular in the European understanding, positive about the EU and view their future optimistic. Thirdly, the lower class prefers the nationalist party MHP.

The AK Parti did not islamise Turkey, but it pushed reforms which made Turkey more democratic, strengthened society, and safeguard human rights. For some years, the AK Parti seemed to have lost its reform drive. Maybe they are now back on the track. However, Turkey has already changed. The diversity of its society is accepted, former taboos like the military or the Armenians are replaced by an open debate. Turkey never was vital as today. Democracy, not a vocabulary in Atatürk’s six founding principles, starts to take root. One of the most important results is that this new Turkey finds peace with herself and with her neighbours.

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