

TURKEY IN TURBULENCE: ITS GEO-STRATEGIC MEANING FOR THE TRANSATLANTIC COMMUNITY



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The term “turbulence” is increasingly being used with respect to Turkish domestic and foreign policy as well as developments around Turkey’s neighborhood, ranging from Ukraine to the post-Arab Spring Middle East. The Gezi Park protests that erupted early in the summer of 2013, coupled with the corruption scandal involving cabinet ministers and their families later in the year, attracted considerable public attention to domestic political developments in Turkey. It has provoked considerable political and economic instability. President Abdullah Gül himself very recently used the term “turbulence” when referring to these recent developments in Turkey. The growing authoritarian style of governance that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has adopted is being challenged by various groups in Turkey. His majoritarian understanding of democracy is increasingly polarizing the country as it continues to face unresolved major political challenges such as the Kurdish question. The challenge mounted most recently by the Hizmet movement led by Fethullah Gülen, a preacher based in the United States, has precipitated a major political crisis. This crisis is aggravated by structural problems that the Turkish economy has so far failed to overcome at a time when the days of “cheap money” that had benefitted Turkey’s economic performance is fast coming to a close. The Turkish currency in the first couple of weeks of 2014 has lost more than a quarter of its value against the U.S. dollar and the euro while interest rates have increased significantly in spite of Erdoğan’s resistance. These developments are likely to have serious consequences for the overall performance of the Turkish economy during the course of 2014. Yet, for the time being, the Turkish Prime Minister remains popular with his electoral base as Turkey enters an eighteen months-long electoral cycle. These developments are

likely to pave the way to greater turbulence in the country and are likely to impact on Turkey's foreign policy too.

Turkish foreign policy too has been experiencing considerable turbulence. The infamous “zero problems with neighbors” policy of the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, is increasingly called “zero neighbors without problems” by analysts. The Arab Spring that had so energetically been welcome in Turkey has evolved in such a manner that has left economic and political relations with pretty much every single Arab country, with the possible exceptions of Libya and Tunisia, adversely affected. Turkey's relations have remained problematic with Israel, too, in spite of the apology issued by Israel for the deaths of the Turkish citizens onboard the *Mavi Marmara* when it was raided by the Israeli military. This past year was also a period when Turkey's transatlantic relations were strained, especially over Syria but also Iraq, until very recently, and Egypt. These relations have also been challenged by Erdoğan's constant references to wanting to distance Turkey from the West and developing closer relations with Russia and members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This is particularly striking as it comes at a time when in Ukraine, large public protests against a government that refused to sign an associational agreement with the EU culminated in the president deserting his government and fleeing the capital.

The turbulence in Turkey and in its neighborhood comes at a time when there is a geo-strategic contestation that continues to unfold between what could be called the advocates of “transatlantic form of governance” based on pluralist democracy, rule of law and liberal markets and a rival form of governance characterized by at best a majoritarian understanding of democracy, state capitalism and disregard for the rule of law. The recent events that have unfolded in Ukraine since November are a remarkably conspicuous manifestation of this contestation. Turkey straddles a geography where these two forms of governance are confronting each other. Turkey had long been envisaged as a country that could constitute a model for the transatlantic form of governance, which could have a transformative impact on its immediate neighborhood both politically as well as economically. However, the turbulence characterizing Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy coupled with the broader turbulence in the neighborhood is clearly undermining this.

Both turbulences have important policy implications in terms of the U.S. and the EU. In the second half of 2013 there were some signs suggesting

that Turkey's interests with its transatlantic partners may have started to converge more. This has become evident with respect to Turkey's efforts to repair its relations with the central government in Baghdad while continuing to deepen the ones with the Kurdish Regional Government. On Syria, both with respect to the idea of achieving a diplomatic and political solution to the crisis in Syria as well as isolating radical and foreign fighters, cooperation with the U.S. and the EU has been improving. On Iran too, Turkey is more and more on the same page with the EU and the U.S., although the corruption scandal has revealed some embarrassing links between Iran and Turkey, undermining sanctions against Iran. More importantly, EU-Turkish relations appear to be entering a more positive period. After three years long break a new chapter was opened for accession negotiations. A long standing and divisive Readmission Agreement was finally signed between the two sides. This agreement once ratified should improve cooperation against transit illegal migration into the EU and possibly open the way for Turkish nationals to travel to the EU without visas. However, these are still very precarious developments and may be undermined by the turbulence within Turkey. Turkey right now is quite far away from where it was only a few years ago when it was seen as a pillar of stability and a model for the neighborhood.

It is going to be important to explore new ways of engaging Turkey and especially Turkish society to mitigate the effects of internal as well as external turbulence. Turkey's stability and prosperity depends deeply on a well-functioning national economy and a stable neighborhood. Many in Turkey recognize that both objectives are much more likely to be achieved if the transatlantic form of governance prevails in Turkey and its neighborhood. Just as ensuring Ukraine's transition into a fully-fledged democracy and a liberal economy will be critical to the transatlantic community's geo-strategic interests, ensuring that Turkey remains a member of this community is essential. The U.S. and the EU will have to demand more strongly that the Turkish government respect the values of liberal democracy, ranging from freedom of expression to the rule of law and respect for human rights. Reviving the prospects of EU membership is likely to be an important motivation for the government, but also the country at large. Exploring possible ways of including Turkey in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) would be another path of anchoring Turkey in the transatlantic community. Actually, this was openly raised by Davutoğlu during his visit to Washington in November last year. Lastly, in

the light of the ever-increasing number of Syrian refugees, now close to one million, burden-sharing from the U.S. and the EU in the form of financial assistance, resettlement programs for at least some of the refugees, and closer cooperation in managing the refugee crisis would go a long way in generating goodwill in Turkey with respect to the transatlantic community.