

TURKEY: FROM STATE TO FAITH-BASED NGO

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The recent events between Israel and Turkey in addition to Turkey's positioning on the side of Iran and the tightening of relations with radical regimes in the region have raised question marks and warning signals in Washington and various European capitals. Efforts to label Turkish policy as motivated by Islam, or purely as neo-Ottoman on the one hand, as well as efforts to label it as merely ethical on the other, are not helpful in understanding its policy and the strategies of implementing it. The incident of the recent Gaza-bound flotilla helped define its foreign policy – its internal logics that suffer from internal contradicting logics.

Simply put, the Gaza flotilla revealed mostly that Turkey moves between imperial logic, whose purpose is to position Turkey as a hegemonic actor on the regional level, and an important player on the international one, and universal logic that is based on morality and justice. What is more interesting is the fact that the strategy of implementing these approaches include economic moves in the Arab world, and at the same time vis a vis the the western world, and Israel within it, Turkey is applying a strategy that characterizes less a state and more a civil society NGO.

Contrary to the considerations that state interests hold at the top of their agenda, Turkish policy makers have adopted an outlook that sacrifices these interests on the altar of absolute and universal morality. This is an outlook that seeks to endorse moral norms and transform the international scene into one that is similar, in principle, to that of civil society. It dreams of overturning the global order on its head and fulfilling a Kantian dream.

Turkish conduct vis a vis the U.S. on the issue of Iran, along with Brazil, is indicative of this attitude. Its conduct vis a vis Israel reinforces the moral aspect – the one the Turks like to stress – which they wish to bring to the table of the "international community." Except, for them to be taken seriously, states must retain their moral standing consistently, like Canada does for example. Otherwise they are perceived simply as being anti-American. Indeed, Turkish diplomats are learning today dreaming is one thing, and reality is something else.

Turkish foreign policy suffers from two main problems. The first is that the adoption of a vision for the creation of an international community is nice and correct, in theory alone. Even then only a few countries can allow themselves to adopt such outlook. It is highly doubtful that Turkey can be one of them. The impossible mathematical equation of "zero problems" can be understood in this context; however it mostly reflects naiveté and lack of experience.

The second problem is that there exists an internal contradiction between the imperial logic and the universal morality that they are trying to establish vis a vis the European Union, the U.S. and Israel. The Turks are proud that their policy is not based on *realpolitik*. The amusing attempt to compare Davutoğlu to Kissinger did not please the architect of Turkey's foreign policy. After all, he is an idealist.

Turkish researchers of international relations have explained the doctrine of Turkish foreign policy since 1999 as a shift from a Hobbesian to a Kantian worldview, and indeed many in Turkey understand the policy in this light. In view of the forgiving attitude that Turkey has exhibited toward Mohammed el-Bashir of Sudan and regimes that systematically violate human rights, like Iran and Syria, it is hard to conclude if the problem of these researchers is one of selective morality that is based on Islamic principles and ethics unique to the Muslim world, or that they need to retake the first year Introduction to Kant.

A foreign policy that is based on ideals, ethics and morality must be consistent in order for it to be considered genuine. The choice to strengthen relations with two of the least enlightened states in the region, Syria and Iran, does not reflect consistency. It is hard to believe that the oppressive attitude of Iran toward religious minorities, women, homosexuals and many others, does not trouble the AKP leadership. Perhaps they assume that a policy of containment and engagement instead of confrontation will be more effective. If this is the case then we should ask, why is such a policy not applied toward Israel? The answer can apparently be found where Erdogan has already hinted, when he was asked to explain the forgiving attitude toward the leader of Sudan. "Muslims," he said, "cannot commit genocide."

Another claim that is being raised in the media recently is that essentially Turkey is trying to create regional peace and stability. But, if that is the case, why ally with militant and revolutionary entities? Assailing conservative but stable states is not logical in this case. So what explains the Turkish stance? Contrary to the claim that is often mentioned in Israel, Turkish policy is not anti-Semitic, even if it does encourage anti-Semitic elements to raise their voice. The public relations campaign against the Jewish lobby is not proof of this. Presumably it stems from frustration of a process that was managed unprofessionally and has failed, and of a lack of understanding of the American political system. It would do good for all if the Turkish public relations campaign against Israel and the American Jewry, bound to fail, would cease. It will stir a counter public relations campaign, which has already began.

Even if there are those among us who will adopt the Turkish version that their policy has good intentions, to assist the Palestinians, and harming Israel is not a goal in and of itself, and even if we accept that the policy of Israel needs to change toward the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, that does not mean that foreign policy can be conducted like a civil society project. At this time it seems that Erdogan and Davutoğlu move between economic imperial ambitions and the transformation of Turkey into a social NGO with a religious base. However, when the dreams come to an end, we can assume that the

realists in Turkey will explain to the politicians that in the absence of a possibility of moderate US hegemony through coalitions with countries like Brazil, Venezuela and Iran, the ability of Turkey to emerge with an upper hand on the international scene is minimal.