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Turkey at 100: Between Constancy and Change

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ABSTRACT

One hundred years after its establishment, the Turkish Republic remains an international actor of considerable geopolitical and also analytical consequence. As with all such actors, the exercise of its growing power is shaped by tension between rest and motion, structural parameters and human agency, and domestic and interstate dynamics. Utilizing some key insights of Thucydides and Ibn Khaldun, this essay will consider the interplay of these factors through a case study of the AK Party's foreign policy. Special attention will be devoted to the increasingly fraught relationship with the United States; a dynamic illuminated, it is suggested, by considering the evolution of American attitudes toward Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s.

Keywords: Turkish foreign policy, Ibn Khaldun, Thucydides, Republican elites, AK Party.

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Introduction

Heraclitus said all is flux. Parmenides said all is one. The tension between those two perspectives is fruitful, because each yields valuable insights. In the case of Turkish foreign policy since the establishment of the Republic 100 years ago, for example, a “Parmenidean” approach can point to one essential reality – Turkey neighbors Russia – and find that sufficient to explain virtually all the most important features of Turkish behavior, such as its acute sense of vulnerability; its relationship with the Western powers; and its desire to maintain a stable and controlled regional hinterland. If one wants to know more about the variations within this continuity, however, then one will need to adopt a more “Heraclitean” approach. This article explores the tension between the two approaches – the possibilities for change within the constraints that can frustrate it – by focusing on the case of Turkish foreign policy since the rise of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AK Party) in 2002. It begins with a review of certain themes introduced by Thucydides and Ibn Khaldun – the interplay between rest and motion, structural factors and human agency, interstate and domestic dynamics – of particular relevance to the Turkish case. It then seeks to explain the evolution of AK Party foreign policy, in part through a comparison with the experience of Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, before considering the current aporia it has reached.

Two Historical Guides

The tension between structural continuity and the various manifestations of change (demographic, economic, technological, political) has constituted the core of international relations theory since its earliest formulations. Before taking up the contemporary Turkish case, it is worth reviewing the treatment of this tension by two thinkers whose insights remain unsurpassed: Thucydides and Ibn Khaldun. In Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the primary protagonists – Sparta and Athens – are made to represent, respectively, the principles of continuity or rest on the one hand, and of change or motion on the other. One way Thucydides explores the interplay of these two principles is through the crucial distinction he sets up between the internal, domestic sphere (where rest or peace is the paramount imperative) and the external “international” sphere (where human nature in the absence of any overarching restraining authority renders motion or war inescapable). Thucydides reminds us, however, that the domestic sphere must itself be created initially from disorder, so the state of war is always primary.

Both spheres, moreover, stand on a material or natural basis. Thus, in the remote past the Spartans subjugated neighboring peoples such as the Messenians and Laconians and set them to work cultivating their inland empire's resources. It is these particular material conditions – a large slave population and fertile soil – which shaped the Spartan regime. The availability of food and other necessities eliminated the need for further expansion, while the fear of slave rebellion kept the military at home. Within the Spartan ruling class, solidarity and discipline were maintained through pious adherence to an ethos that discouraged self-centered distinction in favor of the common good. In order to shield both the Spartan elite and its slave subjects from destabilizing foreign ideas and influences, travel and commerce were kept to an absolute minimum. Sparta's material endowment thus produced a conservative, austere, cautious, and xenophobic culture that in turn sustained a regime Thucydides himself praised for its extraordinary stability and longevity.

Athens started out from a very different natural endowment: a barrenness of soil that protected it from invasions but also made it a safe haven for refugees from wars in more desirable lands. Its population therefore grew without a commensurate rise in food production, making necessary both commerce and the founding of overseas colonies to siphon off its excess numbers, as well as of course the maritime military capability to protect such intercourse. Sea-based imperial expansion in turn generated innovations technical (more advanced ships and fortifications), sociological (a rise in the status and therefore political influence of commoners who provided the bulk of the oarsmen), and ultimately cultural: a more expansive worldview – more irreverent, more acquisitive, more daring, more open to new ideas and experiences.

Over time, the greater dynamism of Athens generated a growth in its economic, technological, and military capabilities vis-à-vis Sparta. Thucydides identifies this shift in the balance of power – rooted, it should be kept in mind, in material or natural causes – as the real cause of the Peloponnesian War; one he says made it inevitable.¹ In the course of his account, he also shows how the distinction between the domestic and international spheres cannot then

1 Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (1.23) London, J. M. Dent and New York, E. P. Dutton, 1910, p. 23.

be sustained and, most generally, how motion ultimately prevails over rest in all regards. Even so, Thucydides preserves a space for human agency within this structural framework by highlighting statecraft as a factor counteracting decay and defeat. It is possible for a rare leader such as Pericles to manage the natural expansion of a polity's power without provoking premature alarm among one's neighbors or embarking on premature initiatives of one's own.

There is no evidence of Ibn Khaldun ever having read or heard of Thucydides, who lived about 1,800 years earlier. All the more remarkable, then, that they agree on all essential points. Ibn Khaldun touched on two dimensions of change in his analysis of *asabiyya* – the spirited sense of solidarity that binds a political community together – both posing potentially lethal challenges to civic well-being, but both amenable to correction through virtuous statecraft. The better-known dimension is the psychological or sociological evolution from the stronger *asabiyya* characterizing people living under primitive conditions which engender courage and toughness, to the weaker *asabiyya* that characterizes them when they develop into more advanced but also more enervated and decadent civilizations. Ibn Khaldun provided a vivid illustration of this distinction when he celebrated the conversion of “this Turkish people and ... its mighty and numerous tribes” who “embrace Islam with the determination of true believers, while retaining their nomadic virtues which are undefiled by vile nature, unmixed with the filth of lustful pleasures, unmarred by the habits of civilisation, with their youthful strength unshattered by excess of luxury.” As a result, they “came to the rescue of the true faith, by reviving its last breath and restoring ... the unity” of an Islamic empire that had lost its vigor and could no longer defend itself against its enemies.² It would be interesting to consider what effect Turkey's economic development during the past four decades has had on its *asabiyya* in this regard, but that is a topic for another discussion.

Here, I will focus on a related but perhaps less noted dimension: the evolution in terms of *political* identity from primordial to greater (or imperial) *asabiyya*. Going back to the earliest origins of political communities, Ibn Khaldun begins with the biological clan, founded by a patriarch and bound together by actual blood ties. Its solidarity sustained and its cooperation mandated by the quest for security, for access to the basic necessities of life, and later for distinction and preeminence as well, the clan must fight other clans because “each one will stretch his hand out for what he needs and take it from its owner, in accordance with the iniquity and aggressiveness of animal nature.”³ Ibn Khaldun emphasizes the natural basis of such aggression: war is “something natural among human beings.”⁴ Successful clans conquer and absorb neighboring clans, who become their wards and over time come to claim common descent. In this manner, clans expand into tribes, tribes into tribal confederations, tribal confederations into nations, nations into empires. It is a process Ibn Khaldun welcomes (just like Thucydides,

2 Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-'Ibar wa-Diwan al-Mubtada' wa-l-Khabar fi Ayyam al-'Arab wa-l-'Ajam wa-l-Barbar wa-man 'Asarahum min Dhawi al-Sultan al-Akbar*, Yusuf As'ad Daghir (ed.), Beirut, Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, 1956-1961, Vol. 5, Section 4, p. 802-803. Henceforth as follows: *KI* 5.4: 802-803. Translation from David Ayalon, “The Great Yasa of Chingiz Khan: A Re-Examination (Part C1): The Position of the Yasa in the Mamluk Sultanate”, *Studia Islamica*, No 36 (1972), p. 119.

3 Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddima*, translated by Franz Rosenthal, New York, Pantheon, 1958, Vol. 1, chapter 3, section 21, p. 380-381. I have amended Rosenthal's translation. Henceforth I cite Rosenthal's Chapter, Section and page number (but not volume), followed by the volume and page numbers of Étienne Marc Quatremère's standard 1858 Paris edition of the Arabic text, as follows: *M* 3.21: 380-381 [QI: 338].

4 *Ibid.*, *M* 3.35: 73 [QII: 65]; see also *M* 1.1: 90, 91 [QI: 70, 71].

but much more explicitly), because the cultivation of advanced civilization – the development of the arts and sciences which are the crowning accomplishments of human reason – require as large and complex a socio-political framework as possible. Along the way, however, blood lineage necessarily assumes a more and more “imaginary” or mythological character.⁵ Eventually a new “greater solidarity” (*asabiyya kubra*) must be manufactured – for it can no longer be “natural” – both in order to provide an internal basis of political legitimacy that goes beyond mere coercion, and in order to unite the increasingly diverse polity against hostile outsiders.⁶ Otherwise, survival itself is at stake. Ibn Khaldun thereby identifies a central and perennial political problem: how to formulate a new *asabiyya* capable of accommodating the inevitable diversity of an increasingly complex, dynamic, and outward-oriented polity?

Both thinkers thus proceed from two most basic structural or natural starting points: one environmental and one psychological. The environmental is exemplified by the fertility of the soil in Thucydides, and the harsh wilderness of the primordial nomadic barbarians in Ibn Khaldun. The psychological is the shared recognition by both thinkers that human action within all such environmental parameters is driven by an innate inclination toward acquisitiveness and aggression – hence the “realism” for which both are still renowned. Together, fixed human nature interacts with its fixed environment to generate change. Desire drives expansion, which produces new technologies and living conditions, which in turn transform social and cultural attitudes, which in turn shape the character and extent of further expansion. For Thucydides and Ibn Khaldun, the process must culminate in empire – meaning expansion beyond the primordial identity grouping to incorporate new and alien populations. This is as true for the Spartans as for the Athenians, though in Sparta the process reached its peak so much earlier that it is almost forgotten. For both Thucydides and Ibn Khaldun, empire is nevertheless not the end of the dynamic, for the inevitable emergence of new enemies beyond the horizon combines with the equally inevitable emergence of internal pathologies to preclude permanent rest. Still – and contrary to widespread interpretations – neither thinker succumbs to fatalism, for both are keenly interested in how skilled statecraft, all too rare to be sure, can counteract the engines of decay.

Republican *Asabiyya*: Genesis, Evolution, Crisis

The relevance of the preceding review for Turkish foreign policy should be readily evident. The origins of Turkey’s strategic culture lie in the structural conditions acting upon it as it emerged from the ruins of a shattered empire. Demographically, a population of survivors and refugees, overwhelmingly rural and illiterate, reduced in number, homogenized in religion, and traumatized into passivity by the preceding calamities.⁷ Economically, a fertile land of

5 Ibid., M 2.8 265; 3.18: 374 [Q I: 236, 332].

6 Ibid., M 2.16: 285 [Q I: 253]. For a detailed discussion of these themes, see Malik Mufti, *The Art of Jihad: Realism in Islamic Political Thought*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2019, especially Chapter 4.

7 By one count, 25 percent of the population at independence belonged to families which had arrived during the previous few decades as refugees fleeing ethnic cleansing; 89 percent of the population remained illiterate in 1927. See Berna Pekesen, “Expulsion and Emigration of the Muslims from the Balkans”, *European History Online*, 7 March 2012, www.iegeo.eu/pekesenb-2011-en; Kemal H. Karpat, *Ottoman Population, 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 11.

under-utilized potential and with an absence of commercial, industrial, or financial elites.⁸ Geopolitically, isolation from great powers which were unable to press any claims, as they themselves still struggled to recover from wars, revolutions, and economic depressions. Together, these structural or material starting conditions (a) endowed the new republic's founders with an extraordinary degree of internal and external decision-making autonomy; and (b) reinforced their own psychological response to the recent traumas: to beware any external engagement (Sèvres Syndrome), to beware all domestic divisions (Six Arrows), and accordingly to seek stability and continuity in both realms (Peace at Home, Peace in the World). In short, Republican elites embraced the Spartan outlook, and Turkey remained at relative rest for some two decades.⁹

Because rest always yields to motion eventually, however, the Spartan paradigm could not last. Internally, socio-economic development transformed the passive peasantry into a more urban, literate, and hence politically mobilized population – eroding the autonomy of the Republican elites and generating a resurgence of religious (Islamic) and cultural (especially Kurdish) identities within civil society. External shocks – beginning with the resumption of Russian hostility in 1945 but intensifying with regional upheavals around the turn of the 1980s such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iraq-Iran War and the accompanying intensification of Iraqi Kurdish separatism, and the Communist takeover of Afghanistan – threatened to spill into the domestic sphere, undermining the unifying secular-nationalist *asabiyya* the Republicans had formulated. They therefore prompted responses that were at first primarily reactive: renewed interest in the Middle East; a development project for the Kurdish southeast, centered on a network of dams on the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers; more forward-leaning military capabilities to counter the PKK insurgency based in northern Iraq. What Turkey's neighbors saw, however, was an increasingly powerful Turkey emerging from its isolation, so they in turn reacted accordingly.

Like the growth in Athenian power, like the unification of Germany, like the rise of China in the second half of the 20th century, then, the change in the balance of power generated by Turkey's emergence created a dangerous situation. Statesmen such as Pericles, Bismarck, and Deng Xiaoping tried to navigate such situations without provoking premature conflict, and those efforts necessitated a break with traditional conventions and verities. During the 1980s, Turgut Özal confronted a similar challenge and he too tried to break with convention, invoking instead a subordinate but persistent counter-paradigm in Turkish strategic culture – more populist, more multicultural, more eager to engage with the challenges and opportunities afforded by a changing geopolitical environment. Turkey's new realities required, he argued, a reformulation of collective identity (*asabiyya*) both at home (so as to accommodate minorities such as the Kurds) and abroad (so as to reestablish pre-republican cultural and political linkages).

8 Non-Muslim minorities whose numbers became negligible under the Republic accounted for 70 percent of capital in all factories at the end of the Ottoman Empire, and controlled 80 percent of finance and commerce. See Robert W. Kerwin, *Etatism and the Industrialization of Turkey: A Study of Turkish National Economic Policies and Attitudes (1933-1950)*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 1956, p. 2-xv, 84-85; Leslie L. Roos and Noralou P. Roos, *Managers of Modernization: Organizations and Elites in Turkey, 1950-1969*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 17.

9 An extended "Thucydidean" treatment of Turkey's transition from relative rest to relative motion, and the relevant scholarship on the subject, can be found in Malik Mufti, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture: Republic at Sea*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Özal's premature death in 1993 cut short his agenda, however, and Turkey's policy makers reverted to their dominant paradigm for another decade. But the underlying transformations in the Turkish polity's internal and external structures remained in effect, so a disjunction between reality and ideology emerged. The insistence on monocultural nationalism and dogmatic secularism in an increasingly mobilized democracy, and the insistence on isolationist doctrine in an environment mandating deepening engagement, could not be sustained coherently, so the country lurched through a series of domestic and foreign policy crises during the 1990s which together added up to what may be called an "*asabiyya* crisis."

The AK Party: From "Factory Settings" Back to Republicanism

A new chapter appeared to have opened with the AK Party's victory in the December 2002 elections. Its founders certainly recognized the impasse reached by the dominant paradigm. Abdullah Gül, for example, had spoken already a decade earlier of the "systemic crisis" brought about by the disjunction between secular nationalist ideology and a people "kneaded together" for centuries into an "integrated" identity that reflected their shared "moral values" even as it accommodated their ethnic and cultural diversity. A reaffirmation of that identity – Gül used the term "neo-Ottoman" – would encompass not only Turkey's own population, but also their kinfolk "from Bosnia ... all the way to China."¹⁰ Speaking in 1993, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan likewise argued that a healthy political community could not be sustained by a "racist official ideology" which asserted that "Turkey is for the Turks" and refused to acknowledge the "27 ethnic groups currently living in the Turkish Republic." Such a paradigm had "reached a dead end ... There is no question of Kemalism rejuvenating itself."¹¹ Turkey's structural conditions, he added, mandated an equally radical turn in its foreign policy: "it is obliged to adopt an imperial vision. The rationales for this obligation lie in its history, its geography, its ethnic composition."¹² Just after becoming prime minister ten years later, Erdoğan explained that democracy is just as indispensable as multiculturalism in any viable alternative; a democracy defined not just as "the existence of parliaments and elections alone" but as a system "that preserves the rule of law, separation of powers, and that is participatory and pluralistic." In this regard as well, Turkey stood "ready" to extend its new vision beyond its borders: "to do its fair share to promote democratization in the Middle East and facilitate such a momentous transformation" in regional politics.¹³

And indeed, once in office the AK Party embarked on a series of democratizing reforms, including an outreach campaign to Turkey's Kurds, which encouraged many observers to hope that a decisive shift to liberal – or as some put it, "Europeanized" – politics was

10 Abdullah Gül, "Moral Değerleri Açısından Türkiye'nin Millî Bütünlüğü ve Güvenliği", *Türkiye'nin Millî Bütünlüğü ve Güvenliği: Türkiye Gönüllü Kültür Teşekkülleri III. İstişare Toplantısı – 19 Aralık 1992*, Ankara, İstanbul, İş Dünyası Vakfı, 1993, p. 116-119, 124-125.

11 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Demokrasi Amaç Değil, Araçtır", Metin Sever and Cem Dizdar (eds.), 2. *Cumhuriyet Tartışmaları: Yeni Arayışlar, Yeni Yönelimler*, Ankara, Başak Yayınları, 1993, p. 425.

12 Ibid., p. 430.

13 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Democracy in the Middle East, Pluralism in Europe: Turkish View", Speech at Harvard University, 30 January 2003, <http://www.belfercenter.org/files/erdogan%20speech,%20full%20-%20english%20version.doc>.

under way. Yet two decades later, there can no longer be any question as to the outcome of such hopes. Internally, elected Kurdish parliamentarians and mayors have been ousted from office and imprisoned, as now-President Erdoğan declared the peace initiative dead: “Do not expect another solution process. That thing has passed.”¹⁴ With the crackdown on opposition extending far beyond Kurdish circles, the renewed embrace of Turkish nationalism is paralleled by a less inclusive tone in electoral politics as well: “The fates of Turkey and the AK Party have virtually merged. Whoever loves Turkey loves us too, and whoever hates Turkey hates us too.”¹⁵ Externally, Turkey’s projection of both soft and hard power in support of democratization and integration in the Middle East has shifted back to a focus on anti-Kurdish interventions in Syria and Iraq, also consistent with the nationalist *asabiyya* of earlier Republican security elites.

What happened? For some AK Party critics, this “turn” reflects a latent authoritarianism present from the very beginning, merely awaiting a propitious time to reveal itself. For some AK Party defenders, it is a reaction necessitated by the subversions of malicious external actors alarmed by Turkey’s growing power. A brief look at American-Egyptian relations during the 1950s and 1960s – which display notable parallels with American-Turkish relations in recent years – may shed light on the question by illustrating how structural constraints (here, the calculations of a global hegemon) can frustrate attempts to effect fundamental change.

A Brief Digression: Nasser’s Rise and Fall

There have been numerous instances of the United States (US) cooperating with ambitious actors in order to counter a more urgent threat, then seeking to curtail that actor’s ambitions in turn once the original threat has receded: the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet Union, for example, or Saddam Hussein against revolutionary Iran. Perhaps the most germane precedent for our purposes here is the US relationship with Egypt under Jamal `Abd al-Nasser. Nasser’s determination to chart a radically more independent course, and especially his quest to project Egyptian hegemony through pan-Arabism after 1954, ran counter to Washington’s regional design. As late as January 1958, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was still reminding his colleagues on the National Security Council (NSC) that: “If the policy on the supply of oil from the Arab states to Western Europe were made uniform as a result of the unification of the Arab states, ... [passage censored] ... the threat to the vital oil supply of Western Europe from the Near East would become critical,” later adding that “the State Department wanted to be very careful that we did not end up by uniting the Arab states against the United States and the West.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, American concerns about Communist influence in Syria after 1956 and in Iraq after the July 1958 coup grew so acute, and Nasser’s role as the only effective counterweight to that influence seemed so evident – particularly when Egypt and Syria merged to

14 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Speech in Konya, 17 December 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQ_9U7yeLsM.

15 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Speech in Hatay, 25 June 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekBuiNxSBVk>.

16 Briefing note on the suggestions of the Planning Board of the National Security Council, 21 January 1958, US *Declassified Documents Reference System*, Washington, D.C., Carrollton Press, 1975, microfiche (henceforth USDD) 1985: 000640, p. 2; Summary of the discussion at the 353rd meeting of the NSC, 30 January 1958, USDD-1990: 00328, p. 8.

form the United Arab Republic (UAR) under his leadership in February 1958 – that Washington came to see him as very much the lesser of two evils. As President Eisenhower himself wryly put it: “Since we are about to get thrown out of the area, we might as well believe in Arab nationalism.”¹⁷ The new thinking was formalized in a National Security Council report (NSC 5820/1), dated 4 November 1958, that would shape US regional policy for the next half-decade. Acknowledging that “the prevention of further Soviet penetration of the Near East and progress in solving Near Eastern problems depends on the degree to which the United States is able to work more closely with Arab nationalism,” the report laid out the rationale for propping up Nasser’s Egypt (including through vital wheat shipments), and cooperating with it on “area-wide” issues – distancing the United States from Jordan’s monarchy, for example, and encouraging Israeli “willingness to become a finite [i.e., non-expansionist] and accepted part of the Near Eastern nation-state system.”¹⁸ In practice this included putting Israel in the “ice-box,” a formulation subsequently used by American and Egyptian officials to mean keeping Israel’s frontiers quiet, and preventing it from harassing Nasser as it had done earlier in the decade (for example with the 1955 Gaza raid). Nasser reciprocated by launching a major anti-Communist campaign in December 1958, rounding up party members within the UAR, instigating his pan-Arab supporters to rise up against Iraq’s new ruler and his Communist occasional allies, and engaging in a vitriolic war of words with the Soviet Union.

This American entente with Nasser lasted only a few years. Syria’s secession from the UAR in 1961 led two years later to the rise to power in both Syria and Iraq of virulently anti-Communist Ba’thist regimes, reducing Nasser’s utility for the United States even as it eroded his claim to pan-Arab leadership. Nasser’s efforts to reverse his fortunes – such as his intervention on the anti-Saudi side of the Yemeni civil war – served only to strengthen the emerging conviction in Washington that it was time to clip his wings. In the words of a summary record of a 1964 NSC meeting:

State officials are reexamining our policy toward Nasser. During the past two years we have not received very much in return for our assistance to Egypt. In fact, the Egyptians have done many things harmful to our interests, such as sending more troops into Yemen rather than withdrawing them ... and encouraging Libya to ask us and the U.K. to give up our Libyan bases. These developments have given rise to concern and the Department will be taking a hard look at our current policy toward Nasser.¹⁹

It is important to note that this reassessment does not seem to have translated into an outright campaign to overthrow Nasser. As a background paper prepared for President Johnson in August 1966 put it: “There are those – certainly the British and probably the Saudis – who think that any successor regime would be better than the present one. This is dubious. ... If the Egyptians should decide to depose him that is their business. But there is no American interest in becoming a party to a plot or in letting the situation in Egypt degenerate into total

17 Summary of the 374th NSC meeting on 31 July 1958, USDD-1990: 000331, p. 11.

18 “NSC 5820/1: U.S. Policy Toward the Near East”, 4 November 1958, USDD-1980: 386B, p. 2, 9, 10, 11-12.

19 USDD-1986: 002821, p. 3-4.

instability in the hope that something better will turn up.”²⁰ Instead, the Americans seem to have sought only to contain Nasser by conventional means – cutting off economic assistance, including vital food supplies, and building up regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and, most consequentially, Israel. Out of the ice-box and free to pursue its own distinct interests at last, Israel for its part resumed its aggressive stance toward its Arab neighbors – for example on the issue of diverting Jordan River waters – setting in motion an escalating dynamic that led Nasser to increasingly risky counter-measures as he struggled to maintain his regional and domestic standing. David Nes of the US Embassy in Cairo worried presciently in May 1967: “We seem to have driven Nasser to a degree of irrationality bordering on madness, fed, of course, by the frustrations and fears generated by his failures domestic and foreign.”²¹ The Americans may not have set out to overthrow Nasser, but what they viewed as a measured clipping of his wings he could not but interpret as an existential threat. Less than a month later, his quest for a propaganda victory in Sinai led him into the disaster of the 1967 War.

A Turkish Parallel?

Turkey is not Egypt, and Erdoğan is no Nasser. But there are some noteworthy parallels. In both cases, a greater threat to US interests overrode countervailing concerns to generate a close alignment. In both cases, changing conditions – including the emergence of alternative solutions to counter that threat – led to a withdrawal of US support that created a dangerous environment for the erstwhile partner.

Thus, just as Nasser was able to present himself as the most viable counterweight to Soviet-backed Communism in the 1950s, the AK Party came to seem the most effective alternative to the militant Islamism that challenged US regional interests after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Iraq in 1991. Al-Qa’ida’s 9/11 attacks on the US homeland one decade later crystallized this perception among policy makers such as National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. As Wolfowitz put it in a London speech in December 2002: “It is difficult to exaggerate how much the fury of September 11th changed America’s outlook on the world.” The overarching imperative, he continued, was now not just simply defeating elements such as al-Qa’ida, but “demonstrating to those who might be recruited to their cause that there’s a better way, a better alternative and so I think reform in the Muslim world is a fundamental strategic objective.” Turkey, particularly under the AK Party that had just been elected into office, “demonstrates that a democratic system is indeed compatible with Islam” and so “has the potential to be a model for the Muslim world.”²² President George Bush himself, in 2004, described the Turkish “model” as “vital” for the success of his administration’s “Broader Middle East Initiative” to democratize the region so that it “will no longer produce ideologies and movements that seek to kill our citizens.”²³

20 “Current Status of US-UAR Relations”, 12 August 1966, USDD-1980: 323B.

21 Letter from Nes to Rodger P. Davies at the State Department, 11 May 1967, USDD-1985: 002605.

22 Paul Wolfowitz, speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 2 December 2002, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=1876>.

23 George W. Bush, speech at Galatasaray University, Istanbul, 29 June 2004, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=64397>.

Just as in the case of Egypt, the United States was not oblivious to the risks entailed in building up an emerging new regional power. Already in 2000, even before the AK Party's rise, an American military analyst pointed to Turkey's "increased military strength relative to its neighbors," and warned that its "potential emergence as a regional hegemon is a mixed blessing. ... American policymakers are ill prepared to manage Turkey's growing assertiveness in foreign policy and security affairs."²⁴ The urgency of the new threat posed by militant Islamism, however, coupled with the AK Party's focus on democratizing reforms at home as it sought to fend off an authoritarian backlash by hardline Kemalists, particularly within the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), served to push such concerns to the back burner. The result was a convergence of interests, with the AK Party government initially adopting a low-profile and nonconfrontational posture in foreign affairs – where in any case the TAF continued to dominate policy on key issues such as Iraq – and the United States lending its backing to the AK Party's attempt to establish civilian control over the Turkish political system.

This support continued for several years. When the TAF tried to organize opposition to Abdullah Gül's ascension to the presidency in the summer of 2007, for example, a US State Department spokesman said: "We support the democratic order in Turkey. ... Certainly we don't want the military or anyone else interfering in the constitutional process or doing anything in an extra constitutional way."²⁵ By the beginning of 2008, accordingly, as the TAF high command reeled from a series of arrests on coup conspiracy charges – apparently engineered to some extent by adherents of the Fethullah Gülen movement, and aimed primarily at purging ultra-Kemalist and "Eurasianist" officers favoring a more geopolitically neutral or even pro-Russian and pro-Chinese stance – and also from an incursion against the PKK in northern Iraq which was aborted following intense American opposition, the balance of power within Turkey had shifted decisively in favor of the AK Party. After the Arab uprisings broke out three years later, therefore, one might have expected the United States and Turkey to collaborate closely in support of region-wide demands for greater political representation. But they did not, for several reasons that have been extensively analyzed and therefore need only be summarized here:

First, Barack Obama's administration had abandoned the notion that democratization in the Middle East was either attainable or, in the short term at least, desirable. Instead, as al-Qa'ida and then ISIS moved to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the Iraqi, Syrian, Libyan, and Yemeni states, and as the more moderate Muslim-Brotherhood type Islamists backed by Turkey proved too politically and militarily weak to pose a credible counterforce, the American focus shifted back once again in favor of the authoritarian status quo.

Second, American and Turkish interests increasingly diverged in Iraq and Syria more specifically as the US began favoring whichever actors would be most effective in the battle against militant Islamism – whether it be the Shi'a-dominated and Iran-backed government in Baghdad, or the Kurdish PKK-offshoot Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, even though Ankara viewed both as strategic threats – and Turkey continued to back anti-regime Sunni ele-

24 Michael Robert Hickok, "Hegemon Rising: The Gap Between Turkish Strategy and Military Modernization", *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No 2, 2000, p. 105-106.

25 Statement by US Department of State Deputy Spokesman Tom Casey, 2 May 2007, http://ankara.usembassy.gov/statement_050207.html.

ments in both countries, even though Washington suspected some of them of being connected to al-Qa'ida or ISIS.

Third, Kurdish nationalists successfully seized the initiative against ISIS in both northern Iraq and northern Syria, particularly after the battles of Kobani and Sinjar in 2014-2015. This presented the United States with an effective anti-Islamist alternative that could also ward off Turkish ambitions to the south while at the same time constituting a more fractured, vulnerable, and dependent – and therefore potentially more tractable – ally. By early 2016, matters reached a point where American soldiers in northern Syria were photographed wearing PYD insignia.

Fourth, the AK Party's attempts to expand Turkey's regional influence by promoting its brand of populist Islamism bumped up against the interests of key US allies. Authoritarian Arab regimes such as those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt felt threatened by their own Muslim Brotherhoods, and resented Turkey's advocacy of that movement's electoral rights. Israel's Likud Party leadership had also long displayed a suspicious attitude toward democratization in the region, calculating that populism would generate a more anti-Israeli stance than that of the existing authoritarian regimes. Such suspicions appeared to be borne out by the AK Party's behavior after coming into office, especially after it consolidated its position domestically and turned to its regional ambitions in earnest. President Erdoğan's denunciations of Israel during the 2008-2009 Gaza conflict, in January 2009 in Davos, and after the killing in May 2010 of nine Turkish activists on the *Mavi Marmara* trying to break Israel's Gaza blockade, dramatically enhanced his popularity both at home and throughout the Arab world. Those reflecting Israeli interests in Washington therefore joined their counterparts reflecting the interests of authoritarian Arab regimes in advocating a reassessment of US-Turkish relations. Whereas their collective concerns had previously been overridden by the American desire to cooperate with Turkey, these grew increasingly salient as the US and Turkish positions diverged over key issues such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian Kurds.

It was in this context that the coup attempt got underway on 15 July 2016, apparently triggered by an imminent purge of followers of Fethullah Gülen who had systematically infiltrated the higher ranks of the Turkish armed forces. Turkish officials had long suspected the United States of cultivating a relationship with Gülen, believing that he had made himself useful to the Americans by providing intelligence both on Turkey and on the many countries – including former Soviet republics – where his acolytes had established schools and other business interests. They also noted that Gülen had been allowed to reside in Pennsylvania since 1999, having been granted a US Green Card.

Such considerations prompted Justice Minister Bekir Bozdağ to assert just days later that President Obama and US intelligence knew full well that “Fethullah Gülen carried out this coup,” and the pro-AK Party media to accuse the United States outright of sponsoring it.²⁶ Turkish suspicions were further fueled when, speaking at the Aspen Security Forum on July 28, the US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said: “Many of our interlocutors have been purged or arrested. There is no question this is going to set back our cooperation with the Turks.” General Joseph Votel, head of US Central Command, added that he too was

26 Semih İdiz, “Will Turkey Be Expelled from NATO?”, *Al-Monitor*, 26 July 2016.

“concerned about the longer term impact” of the fact that several Turkish officers who had worked closely with the United States had been jailed.²⁷ When Erdoğan the following day publicly rebuked Votel for “taking the side of coup plotters” and told him to “know your place,” the general responded by describing reports of his involvement in the coup as “unfortunate and completely inaccurate.”²⁸

While the precise genesis and composition of the coup conspiracy remain unclear, two observations can be made. First, the Gülen movement does seem to have operated with a keen awareness of the prevailing tensions in US-Turkish relations. As former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu noted in a written response to a parliamentary commission investigating the coup attempt in January 2017, many of the Gülen movement’s key statements and actions against the AK Party government tended to coincide with such moments of tension. Arguing that Turkey’s growing influence in neighboring regions had made “certain circles in the United States, the EU, and Israel uncomfortable,” Davutoğlu described Gülen’s criticisms – for example of the way Turkey handled the *Mavi Marmara* incident – as a “message” to those circles that “if you are looking for an alternative, here I am.”²⁹

Second, the post-coup purges do appear to have targeted “Atlanticist” elements in the TAF – those more inclined to support close alignment with the West – while strengthening the position of the “Eurasianists” once again. Although a clearer picture of the extent to which Atlanticists participated in the coup attempt must await further disclosures, therefore, it seems evident that at the very least they were viewed as a primary source of threat by the government. Hundreds of officers seconded to NATO lost their positions, and one of them told an interviewer that he was not a Gülenist and had no links to the coup attempt, but that he believed he had been “profiled” as someone who had received training in the United States and therefore “did not fit well in the new Eurasianist clique dominating the Turkish Armed Forces.”³⁰ The same analysis was offered by retired Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, who described his arrest alongside other Eurasianist officers a few years earlier as part of an “Atlanticist plan,” and asserted that the foiling of the coup led to the “victory” of his own faction: “If the coup plotters had won, Turkey would have become a component of Atlanticist geopolitics and would have suffered great losses – such as the declaration of an [independent] Kurdistan, autonomy in the [Turkish] southeast, and the loss of Cyprus.”³¹ A RAND Corporation report later echoed his assessment of a Eurasianist resurgence: “Advocates of this [Eurasianist] reorientation have reportedly gained bureaucratic influence now that they have assumed some positions in the Foreign Ministry and armed forces that were vacated by Atlanticists purged in the wake of the coup.”³²

27 Eli Lake, “America’s Friends Get Arrested in Turkey’s Post-Coup Purge”, *Bloomberg View*, 28 July 2016.

28 “Turkey’s Erdogan to Drop Lawsuits Against People Who Insulted Him”, *BBC News*, 30 July 2016.

29 Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Ahmet Davutoğlu’nun Darbe Komisyonuna Mektubu”, *T24*, 12 January 2017, http://t24.com.tr/files/20170112112612_sayin-davutoglu-cevaplar-1.pdf, p. 18-20.

30 “Monday Talk with the Purged Former Turkish-NATO Officer”, *Vocal Europe*, 27 January 2017, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/752041/monday-talk-with-the-purged-former-turkish-nato-officer.html> See also Metin Gürcan, “After Massive Purge, What’s Next for Turkish Armed Forces?”, *Al-Monitor*, 1 August 2016.

31 Cem Gürdeniz interview by Cansu Çamlıbel, *Hürriyet*, 24 July 2016.

32 Stephen J. Flanagan and Peter A. Wilson, “Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Partnership and the U.S. Army”, Stephen J. Flanagan and F. Stephen Larrabee et al., *Turkey’s Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2020, p. 190.

If it is indeed the case that the 2016 coup attempt was undertaken primarily by elements seeking to align themselves with the United States, at any rate, then a credible interpretation can be offered which does not cast American operatives as its masterminds. The shift in Washington's focus from democracy promotion to terrorism suppression, and its consequent reliance on a combination of authoritarian Arab governments and Kurdish militias to fight ISIS, clearly diminished Turkey's value, brought to the fore concerns about Turkey's regional ambitions on the part of the United States and its Israeli and Arab allies, and reduced American solicitude for the continued success of its leadership. This fact may have emboldened the AK Party's opponents into calculating that launching an attack against it would generate less American opposition than had been the case in the past.

Just as with Egypt half a century earlier, in other words, once more urgent threats appeared to dissipate, the hegemon's underlying concern about a shift in the balance of power occasioned by the rise of a new actor came to the fore. And just as with Egypt half a century earlier, what the Americans may have viewed as merely distancing themselves from a partner, increasingly powerful but no longer as useful, translated into an existential threat to that erstwhile partner.

Reaction

This, then, is the rationale behind the AK Party leaders' conviction that they are the targets of a multi-pronged containment strategy by the United States and its allies designed to rein in Turkey's growing regional influence. In addition to supporting the Gülenists, in their view, this strategy included enabling the PKK and its offshoots to make territorial gains that raised the prospect of a Kurdish-controlled zone all along Turkey's southern frontier from the Mediterranean to the Iranian border. Internally, moreover, the PKK attempted to exploit these gains by resuming its attacks on Turkish security forces and encouraging civil unrest, in an effort to drive a wedge between the AK Party and conservative Kurdish voters. The attempt appears to have borne some success, initially at least: in the June 2015 national elections, the AK Party's share of the vote, which had increased in every previous election, dropped from 49.8 percent (in 2011) to 40.9 percent – a drop ascribed by analysts in large part to defections by Kurdish voters.³³

The conviction that an American hand lies behind these developments – shared by supporters and opponents of the AK Party alike – is strengthened by comments such the following by an unnamed US National Security Council official: “To be honest with you, it would be better for the United States to support a Kurdish nation across Turkey, Syria and Iraq. It would be another Israel in the region.”³⁴ Whatever the extent to which such apparently offhand remarks reflected actual American policy, Turkish suspicions that the US sought to weaken Turkey

33 HDP Parliamentarian Altan Tan estimated that about a third of Kurdish voters who defected from the AK Party in June returned there in the “redo” election held five months later (interview with Selin Ongun, “HDP'nin Gücü PKK'ye Yetmedi”, *Cumhuriyet*, 9 November 2016). For a more detailed analysis of the Turkish-Kurdish dynamic during this period see Malik Mufti, “Turkey's Choice”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 19, No 1, 2017, p. 71-87.

34 Quoted in James LaPorta, “Official Who Heard Call Says Trump Got ‘Rolled’ by Turkey and ‘Has No Spine’”, *Newsweek*, 7 October 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/exclusive-official-who-heard-call-says-trump-got-rolled-turkey-has-no-spine-1463623>. See also the assertions by Cem Gürdeniz, the Eurasianist retired admiral cited in footnote 31 above.

deepened further with Donald Trump's warning that "I am prepared to swiftly destroy Turkey's economy if Turkish leaders continue down this dangerous and destructive [anti-PKK] path" in Syria.³⁵

Hence the AK Party's sharp reorientation, reflected in the sidelining of founding figures such as Abdullah Gül, Bülent Arınç, and Ahmet Davutoğlu. Erdoğan compensated for the loss of Kurdish votes by appealing to Turkish nationalists instead, entering into an electoral alliance with the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) in February 2018 which paralleled his renewed reliance on Eurasianists in the armed forces. Doğu Perinçek, leader of the far-left nationalist/Eurasianist Patriotic Party, noted the shift approvingly by citing analyses to the effect that "Erdoğan has become an Islamist Kemalist. ... [He] has left behind [the AK Party's original] distinctive policies. ... He has come around to our position."³⁶ Erdoğan's electoral alliance gambit, at any rate, paid off as the AK Party's 42.6 percent of the vote in the June 2018 national election combined with the MHP's 11.1 percent to give the coalition a solid majority in parliament.

For advocates of Kurdish autonomy, and also of political liberalization more generally, the outcome was a severe setback. With the peace process in tatters and scores of elected officials finding themselves replaced by government-appointed "trustees," with Turkey's main opposition parties fixed if anything even more rigidly in an ossified nationalist mindset, some Kurdish leaders began questioning the PKK's strategy of trying to drive a wedge between the AK Party and Turkey's Kurdish population. Thus Ahmet Türk, the mayor of Mardin who was himself ousted and briefly jailed, said that the resort to violent action following the Kobani crisis was "a mistake from the perspective of the Kurds. ... Let me speak very openly ... This was a decision implemented totally by the organization [PKK]. [Civilian Kurdish] politicians had no ability to prevent it."³⁷ For those Americans and their allies who had never looked with favor on the AK Party's original vision for the region, on the other hand, the outcome may be considered a success. It does not really matter to them, after all, who governs Turkey or how, so long as its democratic multicultural model – the "greater *asabiyya*" that constituted the core of its soft power and therefore of its ability to project true regional influence – ceases to exist.

Conclusion: What Next?

President Erdoğan is a skilled politician, and despite his falling poll numbers at the time of writing, he may yet be able to frustrate his domestic opponents, playing various factions off against each other and cobbling together governing coalitions, for a while longer.³⁸ It is also possible that he will continue to maneuver successfully between Russia, America, and Tur-

35 Robert Burns, "Trump Threatens to 'Destroy' Turkey's Economy with Sanctions", *Associated Press*, 15 October 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-turkey-robot-obrien-international-news-donald-trump-767054f1f99f40199a80bfe8e16ccdf>.

36 Interview with Rafet Ballı of Oda TV, 20 September 2017, https://odatv4.com/vid_video.php?id=8F171; "Doğu Perinçek: Erdoğan İslami Kemalist Oldu", *Cumhuriyet* 20 September 2017.

37 Interview with Kübra Par, "Ahmet Türk: Barışın Zamanı Olmaz", *Habertürk*, 26 February 2017.

38 Erdoğan seems already to have taken steps to check Eurasianist influence in the military, for example. See Metin Gürcan, "What Recent Purges, Promotions Mean for Turkey's Military", *Al-Monitor*, 13 August 2019.

key's various regional rivals, avoiding foreign policy traps of the kind that befell Nasser. His experience therefore constitutes a case study testifying to the salience of political agency. At the same time, however, the fundamental problem – the disjunction between the dictates generated by Turkey's structural context as a growing power that will alarm its neighbors (Russia above all) no matter what it does on the one hand, and its dominant nationalist identity paradigm on the other – remains in place, threatening not only to keep the country's foreign policy reactive rather than proactive, but to undermine its domestic integrity itself as well. For how long can Erdoğan's successors navigate these dangerous waters without a radical revision of the dominant paradigm; one capable of generating a greater *asabiyya* that embraces the Kurds and other communities linking Turkey inseparably to its geopolitical environment?

One of the most urgent lessons both Thucydides and Ibn Khaldun sought to convey is the inevitability of change and hence the imperative of a statecraft, informed by wisdom as well as daring, capable of effecting the paradigmatic adaptations mandated by changing circumstances. As the Turkish Republic enters a second century, surrounded by a sea of potentially lethal variables, this one constant imperative remains its central challenge.

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