

# Turkey

## *Before the Way to Baghdad or Baku*

Reply to 'Turkije: Brussel, Bagdad of Bakoe?' ('Turkey: Brussels, Baghdad or Baku?'), Frank van den Heuvel, *Atlantisch Perspectief* no. 8, 2009.

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A lot has changed since I first suggested a few months ago that Turkey is on its way to claiming a greater role in the Middle East and to solving old problems and improving ties with the regional actors in an area that extends from Caucasia in the north-east to neighbouring Iran and the region around its south-eastern borders and further down. After the launching of a glamorous, fast-track goodwill diplomacy with its neighbours, Turkey's leadership sank into the old habits of double-faced politics, marked by bad management and blaming others for their incapacity to go further with the changes they have aspired to bring to life. However, the solution does not lie in switching the geography of Turkey's presumed leadership to the Turkic world as Mr van den Heuvel suggested in his article 'Turkey: Brussels, Baghdad or Baku?' but in fulfilling the leadership requirements of strength and dignity, starting from home.

To suggest that Turkey focus its possible leadership role on the Turkic countries is a limited vision that ignores the country's present influence in a wide area extending from the Balkans to the Middle East, from Iran and Russia to Afghanistan. Turkey is playing an important role of dealing with different parties in today's most strategic crisis areas, and whether we like it or not, it will continue to do so regardless of its own or anyone else's leadership expectations. Besides, the country has already more than friendly relations with most Turkic republics and the Turkic minorities in other countries, such as China. However, transforming this strong relationship into leadership of the Turkic world as well as the Middle East, asks more than keeping up with appearances.

Two of the major issues on Turkey's plate at first appeared to be its successful transformation steps into a new era of peace in the region, but later became obstacles for further progress: the Armenian issue and the Kurdish issue. Putting the Cyprus problem aside, these two are threshold conflicts that have been preventing Turkey from using its potential to improve its position in the region.

In case of Armenia, it would be unfair to blame Turkey alone for not taking the necessary steps for the ratification of the treaty it signed with its north-eastern neighbour last year. Armenia

has done nothing, other than dragging its feet, making no attempt to change the negative situation of the troubled Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and offering as its excuse Turkey's close relationship with Azerbaijan. It might be difficult to see the nature of this relationship from Europe, but Turkey and Azerbaijan are two siblings, Turkey being the elder. No diplomatic goal could change the nature of this bond, nor should this be expected from Turkey. The passing of a resolution by the American Congress on the so-called Armenian genocide has filled the vacuum left by Armenia's inaction with so much distrust in Turkey, that even were it still possible, it would be a lot more difficult to put new bricks on the foundation now.

Another tough subject that polarises the country just as much as the intrusive role of the military is the Kurdish issue. The AKP government's announcement of plans to end the 30-year-old

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conflict that has caused thousands of deaths and traumatised many captured excited headlines in Turkey throughout last autumn. However, the great expectations and joy faded away as quickly as they had emerged once it became clear that the government failed to keep its grip on the situation. While some groups of PKK members were allowed to enter Turkey through eastern borders, the overjoyed celebrations amongst the Kurds alienated some Turks, who feared the country was on the brink of a division. At the height of the rapprochement policy, an attack on a group of soldiers was claimed by the PKK. Then in December, the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) was banned while some of its parliamentarian members were banned from politics for five years by Turkey's Court of Constitution. While a recent series of arrests of some PKK militants in Belgium and similar operations against local Kurdish politicians shows a strict intolerance to the PKK connections, allowing Kurds to study their mother tongue freely and supporting broadcasts in the language with taxpayer's money might be taken further to connect with ordinary Kurdish people.

During the first months of this year, the underlying conflict between the army and the AKP government has caused a lot of distress, never allowing a dull day in Turkish politics. Although it is the first government to stand clearly and firmly against the political dictates of Turkey's generals, the AKP government

has lost track of the democratic improvements it so proudly claimed as its goals. The government has been quick to pluck the fruits of its democratisation attempts, but has not shown a parallel determination in continuing the process with respect to issues that are fundamental for democratic progress in the country.

One failure is a constitutional change. Turkey's constitution is a remnant of the 1980 military coup and it restrains democratic development. In addition, the law on political parties, which requires that a party win 10 percent of the general votes to enter the parliament, is at the bottom of the ills of the Turkish political system today.

By alienating one another instead of playing a more unifying role among the institutions of state, Turkey's politicians are cowardly wasting time in terms of real democratisation. To get out of today's gridlock will require changing the constitution and the law about the political parties in order to allow participation of the people, including more women, in a wider spectrum of the institutions of representative democracy.

Coming back to Mr van den Heuvel's insight, unless Turkey's rulers make it possible for the Kurds and other minorities to equally feel at home, it would be difficult for Turkey to claim a leadership role outside the borders of its own soil. A critique on China's violent oppression of the Uyghurs, for example, cannot be as effective as it could otherwise be. Once Turkey reclaims its strength as a tolerant and democratically stable country, it would be easier to continue and deepen its guiding role among the Turkic people of the world.

To support Mr van den Heuvel's suggestion that Turkey should give priority to the Turkic countries at the cost of its EU application is – to say the least – not realistic. As the EU and the U.S. are aware, Turkey's activities among different groups in the Middle East and elsewhere are, partially, Western-oriented. Both the Obama Administration and the EU seem to share a desire to benefit from Turkey's close relations with the regional actors. It would also be unfair to ask Turkey to completely postpone its EU aspirations, when the country has worked on this process for 40 years, modeling its political and cultural institutions after Western examples. Turkey's showing signs of fatigue could also mean that the EU should work toward a more meaningful relationship that would benefit both sides.

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