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**Yakup Beris
yberis@tusiad.us**

**Asli Gurkan
agurkan@tusiad.us**

BROADER MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE: PERCEPTIONS FROM TURKEY

Lately, Turkey's role in the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BME Initiative) –a new term replacing Greater Middle East Initiative- has been subject to heated discussions on several different platforms. Most recently, this role has been highlighted during the June G-8 summit, held in Savannah, Georgia. Turkey was invited to this Summit as a “democratic partner”, as opposed to the descriptions of the country in the original documents as one of the target countries. This gesture pleased Turkey as it had long expressed interest in the Initiative, nevertheless objected to be defined as a target country.

For a long time, especially after 9/11, both the American and Turkish officials have been emphasizing Turkey's unique status in the Muslim world -especially in the Middle East- as a democratic, secular country with an overwhelming Muslim population. Frequently, they have gone so far as to say that current Turkish political, social, and economic system could function as a role model in its region. From various quarters, especially those in the Arab world, such promotion of non-Arab, secular Turkey as a role model in the region faced serious objections. Turkish and American officials now highlight Turkish experience as a source for “inspiration”, dismissing “one size fits all” implications of the role model approach. The officials of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), for example, have confronted on every instance that Turkey cannot be and does not want to be seen as a role model. Instead, they say, Turkey's own experience, especially its nation-building and democratization process, can offer valuable lessons to the regional countries in their reform efforts.

Nevertheless, despite attempts to limit expectations about Turkey's model role, several developments in its foreign policy suggest that Turkey, at least the Turkish government, bids to

assert a more active role in the Middle Eastern affairs and intends to bridge its long standing gap with the Arab world. Meanwhile, in an interesting way, Turkish government's rapprochement with the Arab countries coincides with its push for starting accession negotiations with the European Union, and hard work in passing all the related democratic reforms. The confidence gained through the success in these reforms and the belief that AKP conservatism clicks well with the Middle Eastern culture and politics, translate into an increased activism in the region.

However, this activism, coupled with the new regional plans of the United States, also triggers deep fears in the country about Islamic forces gaining more political power, and reveals a historical skepticism towards the Arab countries. Adding to this the already difficult task of transforming a region politically and economically, and growing suspicions of the AKP's "hidden agenda", Turkey's increasing involvement in the attempts to transform the Middle East finds, at best, a reluctant agreement by the secular groups (Bureaucratic elite, opposition Republican People's Party, military, and some intellectuals). To the contrary of what one might tend to think about AKP's ability to enjoy the support of the Islamic and conservative groups within the country, BME Initiative causes a great deal of reluctance and suspicion among these groups as well, mainly due to the fact that the initiative has too much American flavor. Therefore, coming from different rationalities, diverse groups share a certain degree of hesitancy towards the BME Initiative.

It is important to note that the debate over closer engagement with the Middle East is relatively new in Turkey. June 2004, the month of Summits focusing on the Middle East (G-8, OIC, and NATO Summits), ignited a somewhat healthier debate on the future of the Middle East and Turkey's involvement in the region. Fortunately, the parties in this debate generally agree on the broader need for democratic reforms in the Middle East. The questions and suspicions revolve around the methodologies, and the sincerity of the major actors in implementing them. The fear that the BME Initiative could divert Turkey from its European vocation and drag it into a "mess" in the Middle East reinforces these suspicions. Nevertheless, as the discussion in Turkey deepens, it invites an awareness and self-criticism about the failed Middle East policies today, and opens the doors for creative contributions to the reform process in the region without reversing the course of the country's integration into the EU.

AKP and the New Activism in the Middle East

On many occasions, AKP has voiced its intention to take a more active role in the events reshaping the Middle East and expressed its deep interest in the BME Initiative. Erdogan stated this interest during his January 2004 visit to Washington, DC, and the June 2004 G-8 Summit in Georgia. In the G-8 meeting, Erdogan clearly laid out the rationale behind his government's support for the initiative. "As long as we are sitting at the table, our words may be listened. Turkey does not wish to be left out of such developments." Such desire to influence the new developments in the region is reflected in the AKP's relations with the US administration as well as regional countries.

AKP and the Bush Administration: For the top party officials, the BME Initiative meant an opportunity for closer cooperation with the United States, despite the existence of differing views regarding the developments in Iraq. It is safe to argue that the Bush Administration's "forward

strategy” in the Middle East converged well with the AKP’s willingness to play an exemplar role for the Muslim societies in the Middle East.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s visit to the US at the end of January 2004 illustrates this point well. The then Greater Middle East Initiative, which at the time was in its early stages, constituted an important part in the meetings between the Turkish and the US officials, and the issue of reform in the Middle East enjoyed a great deal of emphasis in Erdogan’s public remarks. Erdogan underlined in many moments of his visit that Turkey, with its predominantly Muslim population and democratic and secular ideology, remained ready and competent to serve an active role in its region and do its share “to help establish a harmony of civilizations.” In his speech at the American Enterprise Institute, he tried to describe the nature of this new regional role; “Turkey will achieve this not merely through its economic and military power, but its ability to make contributions to the universally accepted values and facilitate their dissemination and interaction among various parts of the world. In this sense, Turkey in its region and especially in the Middle East will be a guide in overcoming instability, a driving force for economic development, and a reliable partner in ensuring security.” US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz resonated with this reasoning in his interview with CNN Turk: “We’re looking to build a future in the Middle East and in the whole region that is positive for democracy, positive for the values that Turkey and the United States share. I think we are working together as partners. That is the important point.”

Referring to the objections that Turkish model could not be imposed on the countries with different social structures and political cultures, Erdogan acknowledged that Turkey’s path to democracy was not a one-size-fits-all model that can be implemented identically in all other Muslim societies, but rather it could serve as a source of inspiration and a reference point for other Muslim societies. In the mean time, Erdogan said the time had come for these countries “to find their own solutions to their problems,” reiterating the message conveyed by Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul in Iran and Malaysia in 2003, the kind of message the Bush Administration enthusiastically advocates.

AKP’s Efforts to Enhance OIC’s Role In the Muslim World: The second major occasion highlighting Turkey’s renewed interest in the region, and its rising –although resisted- influence in the Middle Eastern affairs was the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit that was held in Istanbul on June 14-16. For the first time in the history of the organization, a Turkish candidate, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu secured 32 votes and was elected as the Secretary General of OIC after two rounds of voting. Despite reservations from heavyweight countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, his election came with the backing of Central Asian, Balkan and African countries.

The other success of the summit hinting Turkey’s rising influence in the eyes of Muslim countries was the decisions taken with respect to the Turkish Cypriots. Responding to Turkey’s pressure, the OIC decided to upgrade the representation of the Turkish Cypriots in the organization by referring to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) as the “Turkish Cypriot State” instead of the “Turkish Cypriot Community.” The three-day meeting of OIC foreign ministers ended with a call on members to strengthen solidarity with the Muslim Turkish

Cypriot people and extend cooperation with them in a variety of fields. (The OIC countries also pledged to help Turkish Cypriots in easing the sanctions.)

In addition to efforts to become more active in the organization, Turkey also vowed to strengthen the international role of the organization and its pro-reform influence in the Muslim world. After being elected Secretary General of OIC, Ihsanoglu pledged to undertake OIC through major revisions in order to improve its effectiveness and credibility. In the welcome speech for the OIC members, Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer echoed this approach and said, "Let's look at things honestly and pragmatically. We have to evaluate this organization from a critical eye first in order to transform it into a powerful and influential force." In a bid to turn this platform a center of gravity for democratic change in the region, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul repeated in this Summit his early calls to the Muslim world for implementing radical reforms in terms of democracy and human rights.

Coupled with the recent remarkable steps in the road to the EU, these simultaneous developments signal a change in Turkey's overall foreign policy outlook. Rather than a more passive and reactive policies, Turkish foreign policy under the AKP government carries elements of a more proactive approach both towards Europe and the Muslim world.

Objections to Terminology: While urging the Muslim countries to act swiftly in the self-determined path to democracy, AKP leader Erdogan has insistently cautioned against accusing the Islamic doctrine for encouraging terrorist activity. Erdogan implied in his two visits to the US this year that such misperceptions and biased characterizations were currently prevalent in the West in general, and the US in particular.

Erdogan and other AKP officials, in line with Turkey's overall concern, point out that Turkey does not want to be promoted as a "moderate Islamic" model to target countries, due to its deep rooted secular character. As a recent example, speaking at a panel in Chicago, Erdogan reacted against U.S. Congress Member Jane Harmon and Princeton Professor Bernard Lewis for using the phrases "Islamic terrorism" and "moderate Islam". "If you say "moderate Islam" then it would mean that there is something like "radical Islam... As a Muslim, I cannot accept such a concept. Islam rejects all extremism," he said. Regarding "Islamic terrorism", he noted, "It's utterly inappropriate to associate terrorism with Islam."

AKP's Stance on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Rising Tensions with Sharon Government: On every occasion, AKP officials point out that solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a necessary step in efforts to initiate reform in the Broader Middle East. The message was strongly conveyed during the G-8 and OIC Summits.

Turkey actually enjoys an advantageous role with respect to Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Being the only Muslim country that enjoys close military and economic ties with Israel, and having good relations with Palestinians, Turkish officials believe that they can play an intermediary role between the two sides. Although some deem this vision unrealistic, AKP leaders have often referred to their willingness to exert efforts as necessary to bring Israelis and Palestinians together, possibly in Istanbul. Asked after a meeting with an Israeli minister if Turkey would assume such a role, Erdogan said, "Why not? We told the Israeli minister that we would

undertake such a duty willingly. When our Foreign Minister (Abdullah Gul) was getting prepared to go to the Middle East, violence further escalated. If those incidents had not occurred, Mr. Gul and myself would have had many contacts regarding the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.”

However, these plans had to be abandoned, at least temporarily, after Erdogan’s recent critical remarks against the Israeli policies towards the Palestinians. Erdogan’s critical remarks first surfaced following the pre-planned assassinations of two Hamas leaders in Gaza Strip, followed by Israeli raids in Rafah, which Erdogan characterized as “state terrorism”. "You cannot put the blame on the Palestinians in the armaments race. They are using stones, and you are dropping bombs from helicopters. I told them they [the Israelis] are the biggest-ever arms producer in history," the Anatolia news agency quoted Erdogan. "We have no problem with the Israeli people but, unfortunately, what the Israeli government has been doing is now leading to an increase in anti-Semitism in the world," he said. The Turkish government also temporarily recalled to Ankara its ambassador to Israel as well as Turkey's consul general in Jerusalem for consultations. Although the officials underline that Turkey’s official policy towards Israel has not changed, and the two countries continue to have strong military and economic ties, especially after the spread of some rumors on Israel’s increasing involvement in Northern Iraq, the relations are suffering from a mini-crisis these days.

Erdogan’s bold remarks against the policies of the Israeli government probably earned him a certain amount of respect both in the eyes of the Arab governments that has been hesitant to direct such harsh criticisms themselves, as well as in the eyes of the conservative constituency of the AKP. The extent to which this translates into improved relations with the Arab world and the degree to which Turkish-Israeli partnership can endure this tension retain a potential to affect the nature of Turkey’s future involvement in the region.

Differing Perspectives in Turkey

Conservative and Islamic resentment towards the US: Erdogan’s criticism of Israeli policies resonates well with the Islamic and conservative (the term AKP uses to associate its constituency) line of thinking in Turkey. Yet it is hard to claim that these groups share AKP’s enthusiasm about the BME Initiative. While approving the idea that Turkey should increase its ties and influence in the Muslim world, they dismiss the initiative as a US-led plot to maintain Western hegemony in the region.

Some examples from newspapers published by Islamic and conservative circles better illustrate the point. A columnist from Yeni Safak, Davut Dursun, for example, calls OIC’s possible involvement in the Broader Middle East and North Africa project “humiliating”. He says the OIC has so far disappointed the Muslim world by acting as a US lackey. Influential journalist Fehmi Koru in a recent column wrote that the success of Turkey in the eyes of the Muslim countries depends on keeping its distance from the US just as it did in Iraq, starting from the March 1 decision. Koru suggests that Turkey should come up with its own reform agenda for the Middle East rather than trying to incorporate itself into US-led initiatives.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that although the so-called “Islamists” and conservatives object to the US-led reform initiatives, they support Turkey’s stronger involvement with the

Muslim world. Therefore, to the extent that AKP can convince these groups that a cautioned cooperation with the US is necessary to enhance Turkish role in the region, the objections coming from these groups seem to be manageable.

Debate over Turkish Secularism: According to the Islamist and conservative groups, a Turkey that has outright rejected religion as an anti-modern force cannot serve as a model for other Muslim countries in the region. Therefore, in their views, the country would need to transform its own secular-religious dynamics in line with the Anglo-Saxon rather than the French Jacobin tradition. Ironically, the liberal intellectuals also voice this accusation about too strict an application of secularism. They too call for a redefinition of the concept by the state authorities in a way to lead to a more “tolerant and democratic secularism” in Turkey.

The debate on secularism within Turkey is important because it can work both ways in promoting Turkish model in the Middle East. On the one hand, from the perspectives of the countries in the region, it can lead to a more acceptable form of secularism, which tolerates, instead of control, the religion. On the other hand, the very same transformation –or some may call it dilution or distortion- of the concept increases the odds of stirring a stronger reaction among the secularist elite against the AKP. Such a strong reaction may hinder the advocacy of Turkish system in the Middle East.

Secularist Elite and the Military: AKP’s enthusiasm for the Greater Middle East project is not as widely shared by all. And not surprisingly, secularist line of criticism represent the strongest opposition to an activism in the Middle East led by the AKP.

The secularist perception of the BME Initiative is perhaps best crystallized by the Republican People’s Party (CHP) saga. Deputy Chairman of CHP Onur Oymen, a former diplomat and an influential figure in the CHP’s foreign policy formulations, laid out his views on the Initiative in a seminar a while ago. He stated that pushing for democratic reforms in the Middle East through such an initiative is a crucial leg in the fight against terrorism. “A country like Turkey that has suffered from terrorism for almost two decades, should especially extend its support to the project”, Oymen stressed.

However, judging from Oymen’s speech, the reservations about the US-led reform initiatives builds a much longer list. Oymen and others stress that secularism has to be incorporated as a fundamental pillar of establishing democracy in the region, hinting that the BME Initiative has not put sufficient emphasis on secularism. In fact, they argue, the AKP too does not spend enough energy to promote the ideals of secularism.

The idea that Turkey should be a role model in the Muslim world as an example for a “moderate Islamic” country raises suspicions about the US motives in pushing for such an initiative. “Moderate Islam” has a negative connotation in the Turkish secular psyche. The famous gaffe of US Secretary of State Colin Powell calling Turkey an “Islamic Republic”, further agitated the suspicions of those who think that the US wants to transform Turkey from a “secular” to a “moderate Islamic” one, which they claim is inline with the AKP’s “hidden agenda”.

Obviously, the perception on the secularist wing, which includes the CHP, military, and some bureaucratic elite, towards the BME Initiative is significantly shaped by the deep skepticism towards the AKP. These groups, albeit with a differing degree, believe that the AKP government's determination in the path to the EU might be a tactic to reduce its only domestic political rival, military's, influence and implement their hidden goals. The conspiracy is that AKP does not believe that Turkey would finally become an EU member. Thus, their aim is to prove this to the Turkish public and later on follow their own foreign policy formulations that envisage close ties with the Muslim world, once the other major alternative, the EU, is diminished. AKP's enthusiasm to play a major role in the BME Initiative causes further irritation among the AKP-skeptics as early signals for its ultimate "Islamization" goals. Whether or not Turkey receives a date for starting accession talks with the EU in December will carry a significant weight in the escalation/easing of such doubts.

Some others in these circles simply find the BME Initiative unrealistic. Radikal Columnist Gunduz Aktan comments that the Broader Middle East Initiative "is proving to be a frustration, because the project lacks the financial resources to support its economic planks, and this might make it unable to reach its political aims. Countries in the region might not find this project attractive, as they will all be under great pressure on democracy yet unable to ensure political progress. The BME Initiative is envisaged to be implemented only by countries, which accept participation in it. In other words, there won't be any obligations. The project won't be a prescription either. It will be implemented in accordance with the different conditions in different countries."

The military's take on the initiative is a measured one. It echoes the conviction that secularism is indispensable in the path towards democracy. In a speech given by Deputy Chief of Staff Ilker Basbug on May 27, he said that Turkey's experience with democracy could not be implemented in other countries, due to the unique secular nature of Turkish political system. He argued in his speech that without secularism it is very difficult if not impossible for countries to become liberal democracies.

A recent report released by the Office of the Chief of Staff further elaborates on the military's perceptions on the BME Initiative. The report agrees with the overall promise of the AKP government that Turkey cannot remain outside such an initiative due to its geopolitical location and strategic interests. "It is in our national interest to promote the political and economic development of the Middle East," underlines the report. It once again stresses that Turkey should not be represented as a "moderate Islamic" country but as a secular one. The Chief of Staff report points out several elements that the BME Initiative should pay careful attention, such as specifying a clear target, encouraging cooperation among countries in the region, and ensuring fair treatment among the countries in terms of distributing physical and financial resources. The report also urges that the initiative should be inclusive of all countries, which would like to take part in the BME Initiative.

Increasing Anti-Americanism Across the Board: A widely shared belief in Turkey after recent events in Iraq is that any democratization project that is led by the United States will most likely fail. Many argue that the US has lost a lot of credibility throughout the world but especially among the Middle East countries. Such loss of credibility has been exacerbated by the escalating

violence, Abu-Ghraib scandal, the lack of evidence regarding the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, missing Al-Qaeda-Iraq link, and the perception about the US's biased attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most in Turkey agree on the premise that democratization in the region has to be initiated by the Middle Eastern countries themselves. It has little chance of working if it is imposed from outside.

Conclusion:

In the larger perspective, this new emphasis on collaborative effort to promote reform in the Middle East is yet to be tested. For example, policies against countries that are accused to possess weapons of mass destruction, i.e. Iran and Syria, have the potential to be issues of contention when the policies might require more muscle flexing than diplomacy. In this respect, Turkey and the US are likely to have differing priorities in the quest for democratization in the Middle East when "democracy promotion" and "war on terrorism" present conflicting choices between dialogue and use of force in dealing with the autocrats in the region. Turkey's role as a source of inspiration in the region is also bound to be limited due to the historical baggage dating back to Ottoman ruling in the region. Therefore, beyond the rhetoric, the Turkish and US authorities are yet to describe the specifics they attribute to Turkey in promoting democracy in the Middle East.

So far, Turkish perceptions about the BME Initiative are mixed. On the one hand, it is welcomed with enthusiasm because of the perceived opportunities it presents to the country in the Middle East. Besides, the long term goals of the Initiative offer a unique perspective for reform in Turkey's neighborhood, which is important for Turkey's own political and economic stability. On the other hand, the Initiative endangers, at least it is perceived that way, the well established Western course of Turkish foreign policy. In this line, among the various groups that voice skepticism towards the Initiative, the strongest resentment comes from the secular, ruling establishment. Their objections stem from both a mistrust towards the US about its commitment to building a democratic Middle East in the absence of secularism, and from their suspicions about the AKP's "hidden agenda, beset by Islamic motives". The EU's decision in December 2004 about starting accession negotiations with Turkey carries a great importance in this sense. A positive EU decision might alleviate such concerns about being dragged into the Middle East. It might strengthen the confidence in the country's own democratic and secular foundations. Such boost in self confidence might open the way for greater Turkish contribution to the BME Initiative and increase its public support within the country.