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TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER AKP: IF ONLY LUCK STAYS ON THEIR SIDE

by

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A year after the AKP chalked up a striking victory in November 3 elections, its overall foreign policy turnover seems to be a surprisingly successful one. If the performance measured against the results, the annual balance sheet indicates a favorable surplus. Although the success has not come as a result of the AKP's determination and premeditated policies, the AKP should be given credits, at least, for letting the fortune remain on Turkey's side: notwithstanding the initial zigzagging, Ankara stayed out of the Iraqi quagmire, after all trials and tribunals, fences with Washington were seemingly mended, and being a new party with Islamist pedigree, it somehow compelled the EU to give better treatment to Ankara having encouraged to get an earlier date for beginning accession talks. Furthermore, when one looks back to the events unfolded since they came to power, obviously, it was not the most suitable time to have teething troubles for a party, which came to power only a year and half after it was established.

AKP's first year performance in foreign affairs can be regarded successful due to several accomplishments: Firstly, notwithstanding initial fits and starts or numerous impetuously delivered statements on sensitive issues such as Cyprus, both AKP governments run the decision making machinery smoothly. With the exception of few cases, the AKP leaders meticulously consulted foreign and military bureaucracy in time of the Iraqi crisis. In comparison to what happened on the eve of the first Gulf War, that is, the way President Ozal intervened in foreign affairs precipitated the resignations of the Chief of Staff and Foreign Minister in protest, there has been no institutional conflict or tug-of-war during the Iraqi crisis. Particularly, they took every effort to avoid a head on collision with the military. In cases when the conflicts happened to be unavoidable, they immediately stepped back after the first engagement from what they term 'perilous areas'. Secondly, the AKP governments worked with a will to improve Turkey's prospects for the EU. In order to meet the EU's Copenhagen criteria, the government succeeded to accomplish outstanding political reforms geared, among others, to civilianize the national security institutions. In spite of the anticipation that the reformation process could have been a thorny affair with the military establishment, the AKP scored a smooth transformation. Thirdly, as far as bilateral relations with Washington were concerned, the AKP followed a successful policy of damage control, in so far as they could keep control of the events.

A review of the first year's experience might give us some clues to understand the AKP's future orientations in foreign affairs. Such an analysis may deal with three levels: AKP's ideological outlook, its policy with regards to the war in Iraq, and relations with the EU.

Change of Mindset?

When the AKP came to power, the debate on party's identity was further intensified, addressing the central question as to where the party would position itself in the political spectrum. The same nagging question was raised in countless forms: Will they remain loyal to Islamist credentials inherited from the political traditions they have come through? Has the party leadership undergone a genuine metamorphosis? Are they having a hidden agenda? From the very start, the AKP leaders contended that they are a mainstream party adhering to conservative center-right credentials. Party leaders underscored continually that they were the successors of liberal/conservative Democrat Party of the 1950s and Motherland Party of the 1980s rather than Islamist Welfare Party (WP) and its successor Virtue Party. Truly so, readings of the party documents and official statements suggest that the AKP is determined to take a different approach in foreign affairs than the Islamist tradition from which the leaders have hailed.

A comparison one can draw with the WP's experience in foreign affairs, in which many AKP leaders such as current FM Abdullah Gul as State Minister had taken part, is of particular relevance. Despite the fact that the WP had to share power with another party, which was having foreign ministry in its portfolio, PM Necmettin Erbakan stamped its ideological print over foreign policy. Determined to challenge the establishment, Erbakan made his international debut visiting Iran as a first leg of his *Eastern Safari*. Later, in order to exhibit his resoluteness, he turned deaf ears to the warnings coming from the Foreign Ministry not to include Libya in the itinerary. Although he was not allowed to scrap February 1996 Agreement with Israel, his party missed no opportunity to display its reluctance to improve relations with Israel. Only after his party and himself were banned from politics in 1998, he had changed his views of the EU, which he considered to be "part of the Zionist plot striving to put the whole world under the Jewish domination".

AKP, however, behaved remarkably different from the outset: They obviously avoided challenging the established foreign policy line. They have seemed to be susceptible to critics on sensitive issues from the military. When they met resistance for instance, after party chairman Erdogan raised questions on the 'national policy over Cyprus' toying with 'different formulations for solution', they did not hesitate to make a volte-face. In contrast to WP's avowedly anti-western stance, the AKP made it clear that it would be following a different course than did Erbakan's WP in power. Both Gul and Erdogan reiterated that they would not deal with issues through 'sentimental perspectives'. The visits were not geared to satisfy ideological expectations. It was quite symbolic that Erdogan's first international debut was staged in the White House. In September 2003, when PM Erdogan was planning to visit Iran, he reportedly followed up the advice by the Foreign Ministry that it was not the most suitable time to travel to Tehran.

With regards to anti-Semitism, the AKP has displayed a different manner than did former Islamist parties. From the beginning, it has not resorted to anti-Semitic discourses and worked hard to disencumber itself from the ideological burdens they inherited. Addressing the Organization of Islamic Countries' summit in Malaysia in October 2003, FM Gul criticized anti-Semitism in his talk. The AKP has cultivated good relations with the Jewish lobby in the US. The relations with Israel was another area that the AKP has displayed a spirit of reconciliation. When they came to power, Erdogan expressed that the present level of relations with Israel was far from being satisfactory and therefore to be improved. Despite the raised eyebrows, they have carefully

avoided using harsh words when they had to criticize Israeli operations in the occupied territories. Positive trend in bilateral relations has remained unabated as seen in the conclusion of new joint projects such as the modernization of helicopters by the Israeli defense industries or continuing negotiations for selling water of the Manavgat River to Israel.

Out of Iraqi Quagmire

Throughout the year, the war in Iraq has remained the thorniest issue on the government's agenda. It created complications at least on three levels: First, when AKP government expressed its willingness to support Americans actively, it was caught in crossfire in the parliament from the opposition and the party's own MPs alike. Submission of the government bill to allow the US troops in triggered off the formation of an ad hoc alliance, which also included the party's rank and file, leading to what turned out to be a political catastrophe for the party on March 1st. The party appeared to have lacked resolute leadership and cohesion, and was even prone to dismember in the foreseeable future. Second, both the delay caused by endless debates on the extension of Turkish support to the US, and the parliament's eventual refusal of the government bill unleashed a bitter reaction from Washington paving the way for a crisis between the two allies unprecedented for several decades. Having steadily been poisoned by disparaging remarks from Washington after March, the bilateral relations went through the "most serious crisis of confidence yet between the two NATO allies" in early July when the US forces detained in Sulaimaniya 11 soldiers of TAF's special forces deployed there since 1998. Thirdly, despite Ankara's strong commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq, prospects for the de facto Kurdish authority improved not least because Washington's support to the Iraqi Kurds has been furthered after the occupation. This made the situation in Northern Iraq even more perplexing for Turkey. While Ankara perceived the consolidation of Kurdish statelet in Northern Iraq as a threat to its national security, Washington regarded Kurdish stronghold as a keystone for stability in Iraq.

On both levels, with luck on their side, the government's damage control policy succeeded. On the one hand, after meeting its Waterloo in March 1st, the government successfully portrayed the defeat in the parliament as an indication of intra-party democracy and that of Turkish democracy's ripeness. In other words, while the government was defeated, the party came out victorious. On the other hand, as the events unfolded in Iraq to Washington's dislike, by mid-July, Ankara was approached to provide troops to deploy in Iraq. So once again, the AKP government grasped the opportunity to mend fences with the Bush Administration. In October, the government bill was endorsed by the AKP group acting almost unanimously, yet, raising

concerns that Turkey would be bogged down in the Iraqi quagmire. However, luck was on the AKP's side again. This time, Washington failed to convince the Iraqi Governing Council to give its acquiescence to the deployment of Turkish troops, enabling the AKP to evade heavy political responsibilities once again.

EU Reforms

Having displayed strong determination to follow the course taken by the previous governments, the AKP did not hesitate to carry out the political reforms. The AKP enthusiastically worked to implement the National Programme drawn up by the previous government in 2001. The Programme required Turkey to comply with the EU's Copenhagen Criteria, namely, the rule of law, respect for human rights and advocacy of a free market economy. Major packages of reforms were passed through parliament in an effort to bring the present legal system in line with the EU policy.

The reforms brought many openings for politics in Turkey. However, first and foremost, they meant a great leap forward to civilianize the system trimming the military's power over foreign and security policy-making procedures. Primarily, the amendments changed the central status of the National Security Council, which had enjoyed wide range of powers gained after the military coup in 1980. The council and its secretariat with vast authorities had been instrumental for securitizing all aspects of social and political life. They played key role in the forging of "National Security Policy Document", which laid guidelines to follow in the making of foreign and security policy decisions. These guidelines have often become visible redlines when 'national issues' were concerned. The reforms are of revolutionary nature and bound to change the course of deep currents running underneath Turkish politics as far as their mid-long term impacts are concerned.

Future Trends

AKP's future orientation in foreign policy will likely be influenced by various dynamics working at three levels. First, intra-party dynamics will eventually influence its ideological outlook. For now, it depends on whether the party's leadership would keep its determination to create a brand new party or to bow to pressures from the influential groups remaining committed to Islamist credentials. Although these dynamics are governed by many factors, Chairman Erdogan's stance appears to be decisive. For instance, before the first party congress in October, he took remarkable precautions to keep the loose canons under control. Secondly, the dynamics governing

party's relationship with the military will also play a decisive role in its future foreign policy orientations. They will involve political repercussions at different levels. Should the party reproduce its ideological premises on the basis of Welfare Party/Virtue Party tradition, it will sooner or later run into trouble with the political and military establishment ending with a crisis similar to what happened in 1997. These dynamics will also influence the party's performance in the implementation of the national programme to begin accession talks with the EU as well as its policy on issues such as Cyprus that the military considers sensitive. It still remains to be seen whether the AKP will take courageous steps to complete and implement political reforms. In this respect, May 2004 will be an important crossroads when Turkey might take another direction. If the EU postpones, at the end of the year, Turkey's accession to the Union for a remote future, the coalition ranks behind the AKP is likely to dismember. Thirdly, dynamics that work on regional levels will bring about decisive outcomes. These dynamics will likely create complications in Ankara's relations with Washington. It is obvious that the relations will be shaped by a new set of regional priorities taking shape after the war in Iraq. Changing set of priorities, revised strategic vision, new arrangement of forces might put the two countries at loggerheads in the region. It is already seen that the fallouts of the war might easily put the two allies at cross-purposes bringing unforeseeable pitfalls for the AKP.

Therefore, it will be a fortune telling if luck remains on their side. However, it is for sure that the AKP government will need more luck in 2004. So, the question as to whether they will keep sailing through in the future if the favorable winds no more blow remains to be an open one.