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THE NEW SHAPE OF POLITICS AND SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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**THE NEW SHAPE OF POLITICS AND SECURITY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

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The Middle East boasts of being the scene of the oldest forms of societal organization and political activity in history. Yet, in this region, every sunrise reveals a myriad of unpredictable events and every new day brings change, challenging even the most experienced political analysts. The geographic region largely corresponding to the present day Middle East, including Turkey and extending to the southern republics of the former Soviet Union has been in the headlines and the thinking of political planners continuously in recent years. In fact, it would be proper to say that the Middle East figures prominently even in the domestic politics of most of the Western Nations.

In an interesting recent study Zbigniew Brzezinski talks about three major transformations that took place since the end of the nineteenth century.¹ I will use a part of his model as a take off point. He states that the first major transformation took place when the balance of power system established in 1815 collapsed with the onset of the First World War. The second major transformation took place when the Cold War started between the two

¹Zbigniew Brzezinski, The Consequences of the End of the Cold War for International Security, London, IISS, Adelphi Papers No. 265

superpowers. This came to an end with the ideological victory of the West but made way for the third major transformation which is the beginning of a successful Western coalition. How does this influence the region which we have taken as the subject of our discussion? It is obvious that the Middle East cannot be thought of as a remote and culturally different part of the world which will not count in the strategic thinking of the West. Leaving aside for a moment the obvious strategic asset, oil, the geographic location of the region and the inevitable role it has in world communications and transportation will keep it at the top of any list of concerns for strategic planners for quite some time to come.

Let us glance at the developments in the countries of the area in recent years. The first major event of the last decade and a half was the collapse of the Pahlavi regime in Iran. This event had, and continues to have, major consequences. First, it resulted in the establishment of a militant Islamic regime in a country which, with 92.9 billion barrels of proven reserves, controls 9.4 per cent of the world oil reserves.²

Following a short period of consolidating the regime, the new rulers of Iran turned their attention to the outside world. The bloody war between Iran and Iraq which lasted eight years was a consequence of the rivalry for leadership in the Gulf region. When Iran gave up the fight, and therefore, Iraq gained the upper hand

²Robert J. Lieber, "Oil and Power After the Gulf War", in International Security, Summer 1992, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 161.

for supremacy in the Gulf area, this brought with it the seeds of the second Gulf War which took place only a couple of years after the first, but this time with entirely different actors except for Iraq. It would not be wrong to say that the Western Powers' preoccupation with stopping the spread of the religious revolution of Iran to the "moderate" countries of the region gave birth to the "Saddam Phenomenon" which even today continues to disrupt the strategic balance of the area.³

Even though Khomeini is long gone and power has passed to the supposedly more "moderate" forces in Iran, Iran continues to be a source of concern for several countries in its immediate and more remote vicinity. Its immediate neighbor to the west, Turkey, is uneasy about Iran's continuous support of the religious revolutionary ideas and the moral and material support it is supposed to have provided to Kurdish insurgents and religious fanatics which operate within Turkey. The smaller Gulf states continue to be suspicious of Iranian motives and Iran, in turn, watches with growing anxiety the rapidly developing solid bonds between Azerbaijan and Turkey.

The Role of Turkey In the Region:

As we continue in a westward direction, Turkey shines as a major regional power which has a greater number of links with more centers of power than any country in the area. Turkey's links to

³Shireen T. Hunter, "Persian Gulf Security: Lessons of the Past and the Need for New Thinking", in SAIS Review, Winter/Spring 1992, p. 155.

both its neighbors and to major world powers goes back a long time. It would be fair to say that its relations with the Middle Eastern countries have not always been smooth. Of course, it has had to balance a number of conflicting interests and policies over a number of decades. If one is to choose a date for Turkey's coming of age in the international political arena, its entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1952 should be chosen over all other significant foreign policy actions it took since the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923.

My reasoning for this is that more than say, the formation of the Balkan Pact or the Sadabad Pact of the 1930's, this event cast its shadow over the foreign policy actions it took since that time and for better or worse, this act tied Turkey's destiny with that of extra-regional powers. The next event of such significance would be if Turkey were to be admitted into the European Community at some future date.

Following Turkey's entry into NATO, the hope of its leaders that this would forge closer ties with Western Powers in non-military areas did not always bear fruit. However, in all fairness one must admit that if it were not for this membership, Turkey's recent acceptance as an associate member into the Western European Union (November 20, 1992) would not have come about.

As the Cold War wound down, Turkey's "value" to the West began to be questioned in some circles and this created considerable

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anxiety among the Turkish political leaders.⁴ The 1990 Gulf crisis appeared at a juncture when these doubts were being openly discussed. Turkey's rapid and steadfast support of the Western position may have been in part influenced by these thoughts. Whatever the reason, Turkey once again regained its position as an indispensable ally and expectations began to rise in the country that a more central role might be given to Turkey on decisions involving the future shape of the Western alliance, or at least of the region. In fact, as the third transformation which Brzezinski referred to in the article mentioned above takes place, that is, as the new Western Coalition takes shape and takes charge of the security policies of a significant part of the world, Turkey's position in the region will be strengthened. Since Turkey is arguably the most important country in the region, let us look at the items on its current domestic and foreign agenda.

On the home front, the most important security issue is the ongoing struggle against the Kurdish insurgents terror organization called PKK (the Kurdish acronym for Revolutionary Kurdish Workers' Party). This organization began to attack Turkish government and civilian targets as early as 1982 but in the last few years it stepped up its campaign of indiscriminate killings and bombings. Over the years it became apparent that its existence was tolerated by Turkey's neighbors Syria, Iraq and Iran at different times. The training bases of this organization which numbered around 8 000 -

⁴Sabri Sayari, "Turkey: the Changing European Security Environment and the Gulf Crisis", in Middle East Journal, Vol. 46, No. 1, Winter 1992. p.10.

10 000 militants, were recently discovered mainly in Syria and the Bekaa valley. In the last few years this issue poisoned Turkey's relations with its southern neighbors, in particular with Syria. Recently, however, Turkey successfully concluded agreements with Iran and Syria about these two countries not allowing the existence or the operation of the PKK in their countries.

Immediately following the extraction of these promises, the Turkish armed forces entered a limited area in Northern Iraq to conduct search and destroy operations against the armed militants of the PKK. The forces of the informal Kurdish administration in Northern Iraq fully cooperated with the Turkish forces, and at this writing (end of November, 1992), this operation has come to a successful conclusion.

The second issue on the domestic agenda in Turkey is the shape of the economy. Although the country is expected to realize a very impressive 6-7 per cent economic growth rate in 1992. The fight against inflation has not met with any measurable degree of success. The expected rate of annual inflation for 1992 will be around 65-70 per cent . Needless to say, this creates considerable social anxiety and holds the future of the present coalition government of Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel in continuous doubt.

The third and last item on the domestic agenda is the degree of democratization and the protection of human rights in the country. One of the major campaign promises of the True Path party of Mr. Demirel as well as his current coalition partner the Social Democratic Populist Party was that the political life would be made

freer and there would be an end to human rights abuses which are occasionally seen in police stations around the country. With the passing of the much awaited law on criminal legal procedure by the parliament on November 20, 1992, a reform has been brought about. Now citizens arrested will only be questioned when their lawyers are present and the time of incarceration before coming before a judge will be shortened to 24 hours. There are several other measures which have been put into this law which will bring the Turkish criminal law system in line with the EC countries.

On the foreign policy front, the first issue the country is dealing with is the situation concerning the Kurdish terrorists in Turkey and the future of northern Iraq. Time and again, Turkey has gone on record as being desirous of maintaining the unity of the Republic of Iraq. In fact, while Turkey did its best to help the war effort against Saddam Hussein, it did not and does not, want Iraq to break up. The relations of the Turkish government with the Kurdish leaders of northern Iraq have been very good. Both Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani have had frequent visits with both President Ozal, Prime Minister Demirel and various military and civilian leaders in Turkey. Their pronouncements are that they are a "government" in northern Iraq and not a state. Besides, the Kurds are not the only peoples inhabiting northern Iraq. In addition to the local Arab Iraqis, there are some 2,000,000 Turkomans (Turks) living in this region.

So far, the local leaders in northern Iraq have said repeatedly that they need the benevolence of Turkey for their survival and

that they would not do anything to harm the interests of Turkey.

The second, and perhaps the most important, foreign policy matter on the national agenda is Turkey's relations with the newly independent republics of Central Asia. Five of these republics, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are Turkic republics. Tajikistan, while Muslim, is not linguistically or ethnically Turkic.

Turkey has concentrated major economic and political efforts in the five republics to help them achieve a measurable degree of economic development and political modernization. Not a day passes when a high level delegation is not either going to or coming from some of these republics. Turkey was the first country to recognize the independence of these nations, and has offered to act as a bridge to the West for them, and for the Western economic interests as advisor or intermediary in their efforts to make investments in these parts.

Many Turkish firms are winning contracts, sometimes on a barter basis, from these countries. The government for its part is offering both hard currency credits and training and education programs to the citizens of the new republics. In 1992 alone, some 10,000 students at various levels have been offered scholarships to come and study in Turkish schools and universities. There are two pitfalls, however, which have to be avoided here. First, one has to always be mindful of the fact that as these countries have just rid themselves of the Russian "Big Brother" they do not need another "Big Brother" to replace it. Secondly, Turkey's own

resources are limited. Therefore promising that which one cannot deliver will create disappointments which will be hard to erase from the collective minds of these nations. Fortunately, the Turkish government is mindful of these dangers and repeatedly promises that it will be careful.

The third item on the foreign policy front is Turkey's relations with Western Europe. Turkey applied for full membership in the European Community in 1987. Since that time it has been told that a) it is qualified to apply, and b) no decision will be made until a future date but that it should continue to improve its economy and liberalize its political system. This is exactly what Turkey has been doing for the past five years. There is basic political consensus in the country that it will be a good thing to become a member of the EC. Most political parties represented in the parliament, with the notable exception of the conservative religious Welfare Party, agree that the policy followed by the government on full membership is a correct one. However, given the fact that EC member countries are beset with problems of their own and the uncertainties presented by the tragic situation in former Yugoslavia, accepting new members into the Community will not be done in short order. Even if the likely Greek veto is avoided, it does not seem realistic to expect Turkey's admission anytime before the year 2000. By the same token, it is equally unrealistic to expect that a Turkey which is a member of NATO, the WEU, the Council of Europe and other Europe oriented organizations can be kept out of the European Community in perpetuity. Turkish

industrialists are now all aware of the competition the lowered tariff walls will bring. In large and small ways, the new products that come into the domestic market all are better made and have more consumer appeal. All of which is indicative of the fact that the industrialists are keenly aware of the possibility that their fortunes might be at stake if they do not adopt European standards, once Turkey becomes a full member of the EC.

Finally, a few remarks about the inevitable issue of relations with Greece and the Cyprus question: Turkey and Greece are two countries whose destinies are linked by a common geography and whose national interests will be infinitely better served if the rivalry between them is converted into a cooperative partnership. The reasons for this rivalry and confrontation should be the subject of a different and longer treatise. Suffice it to say that, in recent years, the political leaders of both countries seem to have a common desire to resolve these differences. When Turgut Ozal, then Prime Minister of Turkey, visited Athens in 1988, he was taking a calculated risk in departing from established policies.⁵ The practical results of this move are still to be seen. Unfortunately, Greece continues the policy of blocking moves to aid Turkey in various fora so far. The Cyprus question remains an open wound and repeated efforts at resolving this dispute have so far been unsuccessful. The most recent talks between the Greek Cypriot leader Vassiliou and the Turkish Cypriot leader Denktas in

⁵Sayari, op cit, p.18

Washington failed to bring the two sides closer. It seems that the October 26th round of meetings did serve the purpose of ascertaining the limits of bargaining each side was going to accept.

New Security Arrangements in the Middle East:

What does the West want in the Middle East in the post war period? The answer to this question is simply this: stability, predictability, and a reduction in anti-Westernism.⁶ Each of these terms needs to be analyzed further. If stability includes the maintenance of the regimes in the various Arab countries (excluding Iraq), in the same form as they are today, in the long run this will not be possible. The reason is that, sooner or later, the push for more liberalized political systems and more democratization will become so overwhelming that if a domestic confrontation is to be avoided, some form of constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy will have to be permitted. An example of this has already been seen in the post-war Kuwait.

As a matter of fact, if liberalization and constitutionalism come to most countries in the region, then the third element may follow naturally. In recent years, several, mostly American generated scenarios, have been put on the table. One such scheme involved a "strategic understanding" between Turkey, Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The logic here was that these countries were all

⁶Robert L. Rothstein, "The Middle East After the War: Change and Continuity", in The Washington Quarterly, Summer 1991, p. 140.

friends of the United States and all were wary of the militancy of Iran for their own reasons. Later, a NATO style security pact was proposed by the U.S. Secretary of State James Baker for the Gulf states.⁷ In another scheme, Turkey and Israel were replaced and Syria was reluctantly included in an all Arab security plan. After the Iraqi attack on Kuwait, it became apparent to many countries in the region that a Western, preferably American, security umbrella was necessary for any scheme to be effective and successful in the long run.

Going back to the point made earlier on stability and predictability, for either or both of these to work, arms control and even, arms reduction, in the area is necessary. For a long time now, Iran, Iraq and Syria have been amassing weapons. Even though Iraqi arms have been forcibly reduced, Syria, which is another unpredictable Arab country, has a huge supply of especially tanks which could conceivably pose a threat to Turkey under the right circumstances. Iran's ambitious armament policy is also a cause for concern. They do have nuclear facilities where physicists are trained in the handling of fissionable materials. Although the making of nuclear weapons and the development of accurate delivery systems are not at this point an immediate issue, nevertheless, this is a development worth watching carefully.

Other than the developments on the military front, there are certain issues which will affect the security situation in the Eastern Mediterranean area. The first of these is the creeping

⁷Shreen T. Hunter, op cit, p. 163

rise of fundamentalism even in countries where this had been kept in check. Egypt, Turkey and Israel come to mind here. In Egypt the Islamic fundamentalists were responsible for the assassination of Anwar Sadat. More recently they were encouraged by the turnout of the elections in Algeria last year. The Israeli fundamentalists (and here I use the word in a broader sense), affect government policy since the coalition governments which rule the country sometimes depend on their vote. This was the case, for example, when the Likud government was in power. In Turkey, the situation is different, but worth mentioning, just the same. If we discount some marginal groups operating outside the country in such places as Germany, the one organized political force is a political party called the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi). This party is the continuation of the former Salvation Party which was closed following the military coup of 1980. Very recently, in a marginal by-election to elect some mayors in a number of cities, this party did surprisingly well at the polls (they got some 30 per cent of the vote). While this does not mean that these results will be the same in national elections where candidates and issues are vastly different, still, because this party proposes a much different course for the country to follow, it is very important for our discussion here. Under a Refah government, there would be no Cyprus negotiations, no membership attempt for the European Community, no attention paid to the International Monetary Fund recommendations, no participation in NATO etc., etc. The implications of such an eventuality are mind-boggling.

The second issue that will affect the new shape of security arrangements is a psychological one. This has to do with the threat perception of the countries in the area. A few years ago, things were easy. The "enemy" was easy to identify. It was either the Soviet Union, casting its shadow over the Western oriented countries in the region, or it was "the Great Satan" the United States, posing a threat to friends of the Soviet Union. Now things are much different. The centers of power have multiplied. On the one hand, the age old questions that need resolution, such as the Arab-Israeli question continue, but on the other hand, new bifurcations have emerged. For example, Saudi Arabia, and certainly Kuwait see Iraq as the chief threat. Syria has made amends with the United States, but casts a wary eye towards Turkey which is becoming increasingly powerful and with its ambitious irrigation and dam projects appears to be in control of a very scarce resource, water.

Going a little bit to the west, Bulgaria and Turkey have become friends, and Greece and Turkey are awaiting the possible end of a long period of controversy. On the southern end of the Caucasuses, Azerbaijan and Armenia are bitterly locked in armed conflict over Nagorno-Karabag. A new flareup in this smoldering conflict would put tremendous pressure on Turkey to go to the aid of the Azeris, which is a prospect the Turkish government would not relish.

At this point, I do not believe that time is ripe for new security arrangements and the formation of workable new mechanisms.

In other words, I don't think that all the possibilities of existing organizations such as NATO or the CSCE process have been exhausted. What appears to be lacking is resolve to end conflict and the courage to begin cooperation between old or new foes. It is certain that things are in a state of flux. But there is still life in time-tested formulas.

I would like to end on a happier note. The implosion of the Soviet Empire has created shock waves which are being felt today from the Adriatic to the Caspian sea, and there is no guarantee that other undesirable things will not happen for example in Central Asia. But, in the last few years we have seen the end of many major conflicts. Yes, I know that "in the long run we will all be dead", however, in the medium run as economic problems diminish and wealth is more equitably distributed among nations through hard work and the functioning of the market forces, prosperity awaits our region, and peace is within our reach.

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