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Power Play: Turkey's Bid to Trump Iran

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“Today is a turning point in history. Nothing will ever be the same again.” So said Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan shortly after nine Turks aboard a Turkish ship died in a May 2010 clash with Israelis. The ship had challenged Israel’s embargo on terror-related goods bound for Gaza. Some observers said that the prime minister shook visibly as he spoke that day.

Erdogan was indeed marking a historic turning point. But not in Turkish-Israeli relations. Rather, he should have been seen—and in fact has been seen throughout the Middle East—as signaling a much broader and more ambitious regional agenda for Turkey, one that will impact its relations with Iran. And to the degree that this agenda succeeds, Erdogan’s words will be seen as prophetic: nothing hereafter will be the same.

Among Turks there seems little doubt that the Erdogan government was complicit in the “flotilla affair,” and that the prime minister looked forward to a confrontation that, one way or another, would show him dramatically standing against Israel. Under his leadership, Turkey’s once firm relations with Israel had already decayed. The Turkish radicals on board the ship heading toward Gaza were not surprised when an Israeli ship interdicted them; violence seems to have been in their plans. Investigations are under way. But this is a region resistant to the niceties of depositions; it sees a higher truth in this affair.

The Middle East has known for some time of Erdogan’s determination to change the nature of his country’s strategic vision. Under his tightening leadership, Turkey is distancing itself from a century of Western orientation and half a century of Western alliances. It pursues a patient and careful course toward a leading, or even dominant, role in the greater Gulf region, and perhaps in the universe of Muslim-majority countries more generally.

No explicit declaration marked this change, for none was wise or needed. Erdogan still calls Turkey a bridge to the Muslim world and tells Westerners that he will be an honest broker between them and it. But the Muslim world understands very well that Turkey has tilted toward the East. Until recently, Erdogan had quietly pursued this shift in three main ways: positioning Turkey to benefit from the decline of the Arab states whose leadership of the region has dramatically deteriorated in the past decade; reaching out to Iran, the most openly aggressive claimant for regional leadership and standard bearer for hostility toward the West; and slowly redefining Turkey’s domestic priorities and politics. Few expected the EU to embrace Turkish membership, but Erdogan adroitly used the EU

rejection to undermine Ataturk's Westernizing legacy. There is a certain artistry, if not originality, in plotting behind the brim of Ataturk's Western ideals to favor the headscarf.

There have, of course, been less subtle signs of the shift eastward. In 2003, Turkey barred the passage of US troops into Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In 2005, Erdogan honored Iran's newly elected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the halls of Istanbul, despite Ahmadinejad's calls for genocide. And in 2006, Erdogan embraced Hamas after its victory in Palestinian elections, and then Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, despite his indictment for war crimes in Darfur. Even before the flotilla sailed for Gaza, Erdogan's criticism of Israel had already grown shrill. But the change in Turkey's posture toward Israel has in large part been a tool to advance the country's reorientation, rather than in any sense its cause.

Erdogan's comments following the flotilla affair marked a new stage in his quest rather than a change in his goals. He has declared Turkey's intent to step to the fore as a leader of angry, threatening, anti-Western elements that seek to control the Islamic world. "Turkey's hostility," Erdogan pointedly proclaimed in his "turning point" speech, "is as strong as its friendship is valuable." It was an advertisement for Middle Eastern consumers: we will be the enemy of your enemies, a shelter to our friends.

In the Muslim realm, radical and jihadi precincts included, Erdogan's message was understood and applauded. Arab publics cheered Turkey as a new leader of hostility against Israel. The deputy head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, taking for granted Turkey's role as chief instigator of the flotilla, urged the heirs of the Ottomans toward even more forceful action against Israel—advice he has repeated since. Zawahiri recalled with praise centuries of "Turkish" rule of the Muslim world.

Al-Qaeda's endorsement confirms Erdogan's push to be seen not merely as a leader of the Muslim world, but *the* leader. While he had previously played merely a supportive role to Iran, with the flotilla affair Erdogan pressed Turkey's case. One of the many subtle implications of his "turning point" remark is that Turkey and Iran are now rivals, as well as collaborators in the drive to create an internationally more aggressive Middle East. It is unlikely that Ahmadinejad missed this nuance.

This development should not be entirely surprising. Once Erdogan and his party chose to redefine Turkish identity in a more Islamic, and perhaps Islamist, way, and once Turkey set its eyes east and south toward the ancient Muslim heartlands, a rivalry with Iran was likely.

Iran's regional ambitions are hardwired into the theocratic regime both by its revolutionary doctrine and the limited legitimacy of its rulers. This is especially true now as different factions of the mullahs' ruling elite compete for ownership of the "revolution." As the Arab states' power and influence in the region has declined, Iran has sought, with some success, to take their place. These ambitions have been advanced in

the short term by the removal of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein and by the erratic recovery in Iraq and continuing conflict in Afghanistan, but far more by Iran's unchecked pursuit of nuclear weapons. Iran draws, too, upon the attraction of its enormous proven reserves in natural gas and oil (second and third largest, respectively, in the world). But the mullahs' regional ambitions wash up against Iran's ancient rival, Turkey.

In the form of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey for centuries led the greater Middle East. Today its population and economy are slightly larger than Iran's, and its economy and conventional military are stronger. Despite limits in its democratic processes, Turkey's government enjoys substantially more stability and legitimacy at home and abroad than Iran's does. In addition, the Iranian political elite must deal with a traditional "quietist" school of Shiite Islam, now prospering in neighboring Iraq, that scorns theocratic rule. By contrast, as a Sunni country, Turkey may more readily garner support in a largely Sunni Middle East. Indeed, the country has historically invoked its role as the natural leader of the Sunnis to buy peace at home and fend off pressures from abroad. In Ottoman times, it did so in the aftermath of a losing war in the eighteenth century, and again in the late nineteenth. In that era, Sunnis as far afield as India responded positively to that claim; the recent statements of al-Qaeda's Zawahiri show that Turkey may again attract such support.

The emergence of a Turkish-Iranian rivalry was somewhat delayed by the political problems Erdogan faced when he took power in 2002 with only a minority of the electorate behind him. Turkey's longstanding secular political tradition meant that he had to move cautiously and cleverly in pursuing the domestic redefinition of Turkish identity. For Erdogan knew his history: the Turkish military had repeatedly thwarted previous Islamist-oriented parties, including, only a decade earlier, one in which Erdogan was a leading figure. So he pursued, initially, the safe course of leaning more toward Iran, and following its lead, albeit at a distance. Hence the warm reception accorded Ahmadinejad and other friendly gestures.

But Erdogan's party was reelected in 2007 with an increased plurality and a greater majority in Parliament. Since then, he has further weakened internal opposition. While it will not be easy for him to gain and keep broad Turkish support for his plans, there are signs of his progress so far. He recently rejected with virtually no protest several of the military's candidates for senior promotions; and civilians, not the military, will draft the new National Security Document—both changes from past patterns. Meanwhile, the opposition press has been systematically muzzled—a dash of tax intimidation, a touch of party-supported competition, a measure of prison for alleged seditious activity. Most recently, the constitutional referendum held in September passed with an unexpectedly large majority. Several of the amendments it approved significantly enhance Erdogan's power. One of them will allow him to take greater control of the heretofore independent judiciary, which had remained a source of opposition; a second reduces the military's control of its own criteria for membership, especially its power to exclude soldiers on religious grounds. Moreover, the referendum sets the stage for a complete rewriting of the Constitution, which had already been proposed.

In the meantime, Erdogan's government is pursuing the prosecution of high-level officers for their role in an alleged coup planned in 2003. There are increasingly credible claims among Turks that this is a fraudulent prosecution, knowingly based on forged documents. This might cause Erdogan some domestic difficulties, but the appearance of ruthless dishonesty may confirm for both supporters and opponents alike the depth of his desire for control.

Having fewer constraints on the bases of his power, the prime minister can act with a freer hand in the foreign sphere. Indeed, the two areas at this point may be mutually reinforcing. Erdogan's behavior in the flotilla crisis won him massive domestic demonstrations of support as he headed into the referendum campaign and positioned his party for the next general elections in 2011.

It is perhaps only a historical oddity, but still a curious one, that a modern struggle for leadership of the greater Middle East and its ancient Muslim heartlands brings to mind rivalries there five hundred years ago. Turkey and Iran are the diminished heirs of two great Muslim Empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shiite Safavid Empire. The Ottomans' four-hundred-year rule (1517–1917) of vast, especially Arab, Muslim lands arose amidst its rivalry with the Safavid state, a state founded on the basis of new, radical Shiite teachings. Indeed, the Shiite Safavids claimed a particularly close connection with the divine. Their soldiers believed the Safavid leader a divine incarnation, and they attacked the Ottoman border with millenarian utopian fervor, fomenting Shiite rebellions in Anatolia. The present border between Turkey and Iran roughly tracks the border that emerged from Ottoman-Safavid wars, and this rivalry led to long-lasting changes throughout the region. Before the conflict, the Ottomans were more preeminently a European power with an Anatolian hinterland. Afterward, Ottoman ambitions had expanded, and by a chain of events they had not only defeated the Safavids but found themselves quickly in control of present-day Iraq, Arabia, Syria, Egypt, and North Africa. From that time forward, the Ottomans became the standard bearer of Sunnis and put forward a claim, often accepted, to the ancient and prestigious title of caliph.

The defeated Safavid Empire left its own lasting legacy: the conversion of Iran from a majority Sunni to an uneasy Shiite land. The essentially theocratic Islamic Revolution of 1979 revived radical Shiism and its ambitions, toppled a regional order based on the Shah, and projected power into Syria, Iraq, the Gulf, Lebanon, Central Asia, and more recently the Palestinian community. In time, Shiite-Sunni conflict intensified, infamously in Iraq but also in Lebanon and Pakistan. The political and military struggle between Sunnis and Shiites, Turks and Persians, for preeminence in the ancient Muslim heartlands, especially Iraq, may not determine the Middle East's future, but its influence has stalked this region's politics for centuries.

Atop these ancient layers lie more modern sources of rivalry created by the current regional framework of states and their particular characteristics. For example, Turkey

remains interested in having an influential role in Azerbaijan. A high-level Turkish delegation recently visited and concluded agreements there. Azeris are Shiites, but they are ethnically Turkish and Turkish speaking and maintain a tense relationship with Iran, which must remain concerned with Turkish-Azeri relations because approximately one-quarter of its population is Azeri and rests uneasily under “Persian rule.”

Iraq, too, presents an arena of competition because of its genuine desire to protect itself from Iranian ambitions, the internal Shiite-Sunni divide, and the Kurdish question, which looms large in Iraqi and Turkish politics, and even in Iran, with its own large Kurdish minority. (Recently there have been notably violent attacks on Iranian officials and soldiers in Iran’s “Kurdistan,” though the provenance of these attacks is not clear.)

Lebanon and Syria present yet another Muslim arena for competition. Lebanon is nearby and riven internally, not least along a Sunni-Shia divide. In the recent past, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s support for Kurdish separatists led to an actively hostile Turkish-Syrian border. Turkey has in the last few years undertaken a rapprochement with Syria. Nevertheless, both Syria and Lebanon have increasingly become satellites of Iran. Turkey must inevitably be concerned about further consolidation of Iranian influence near its borders—for example, through the enhanced power of Hezbollah.

Ahmadinejad’s recent state visit to Lebanon (his first) and the enthusiastic reception he received have real as well as symbolic implications. The trip endorsed, and provided support for, the ever-growing power of Hezbollah but also declared how far the ruling mullahs feel that Iranian writ may run. Iran is in effect claiming an “imperial sphere” that reaches across Turkey’s southern border. Iranian flags lined Lebanese roads and signs declared, “Welcome to the protector of Lebanon.” A Lebanese politician observed that “Lebanon will become an Iranian base on the shores of the Mediterranean.” Moreover, Ahmadinejad made the centerpiece of his visit the declaration of renewed hostility to Israel and the United States, saying, “Our world today stands on the verge of change, a change that is starting from our region. Lebanon is an example . . . for the unwavering resistance to the world’s tyrants and a university for jihad.” Ahmadinejad thus announced his own version of a “turning point” and emphasized, as he has in the past, an abiding goal that the “Zionists be wiped out.” Although his visit served several of his own purposes, including domestic ones, one of its most important initiatives was to renew a claim for the leadership role that Erdogan sought to grab through the flotilla affair.

Conflicting interests can be resolved; history is not destiny. The course of Turkish-Iranian relations and the region remains unknown and subject, in part, to Erdogan’s domestic goals, the agendas of others (including the Iranian drive for nuclear weapons), and the roles the Great Powers play.

In the near term, Erdogan may revert to a more cautious mode. He might be satisfied with “profit taking” after the flotilla affair. (One indication of this is the next installment in the Turkish film series *Valley of the Wolves*—very popular in Turkey and elsewhere—which will open with a flotilla scene. As a Turkish film critic recently said, the film will thus

capitalize on Turkey's regional popularity. Erdogan will capitalize, too.) He has sent a high-level delegation to Washington to reaffirm Turkish-American ties. This fits his ongoing claim that Turkey has not turned decisively to the Muslim East and remains a "bridge" between the West and Islam—a claim that is no longer easily credible, but which serves his other ends. Erdogan continues to seek more control over domestic Turkish politics—further rewriting the Constitution to enhance his power, curbing Kurdish separatists, and controlling the military with measures like the prosecution of officers for alleged conspiracies. In the long term, Erdogan may find that it will not suffice merely to bring the military under control; he may want to put his imprint on it and incorporate it into his foreign and domestic designs.

Erdogan has reasons to prefer a cautious approach, but history reveals, especially in the region, that it is hard to tame a radical agenda: Others act on their fears or hopes; Erdogan must know that the prestige of being Israel's greatest enemy exposes him to crises created by others. The consolidation of control by Iran's most revolutionary elements may permit, or even force, him to adopt a more aggressive policy to stay in the game. Hamas or Hezbollah may act for reasons of their own. Erdogan may find it tricky to limit entanglement without jeopardizing his desired role. In the spring of 1967, Syria sparked an escalation of Arab threats and military preparations that soon swept Egypt and other Arab states into an unwanted Six-Day War for which they were ill prepared. Events may not follow Erdogan's chosen course or calendar, despite caution or cleverness.

Erdogan may even see some advantage in Iran's determined drive for nuclear weapons. Assertive heirs of the Ottomans may not welcome Iranian nuclear weapons, but after observing diplomacy between Ahmadinejad and the West, Erdogan may well conclude that only a successful Israeli strike will slow Iran. By joining Brazil to mediate a transparently unacceptable nuclear deal with Iran, Erdogan raises his profile and hedges his bets: If the West falters, or if it succeeds, he has not weakened the Muslim world or exposed Turkey to Iran. In the near term, there are other opportunities for Turkish regional gains: Iran's nuclear bid has weakened its economy and stirred up opposition among Sunni states; in the wake of an Israeli strike, should one occur, Turkey will raise its public voice in anger, even if among its leaders there is some private relief.

But Turkey's own nuclear ambitions—and not just Iran's—loom in Erdogan's maneuvers. In the shadow of Iran's headlong rush, Turkey has quietly pursued a nuclear course of its own. In 2006, Erdogan revived the country's long-delayed plans for nuclear power; in 2007, the Turkish Parliament acted affirmatively; in 2010, Turkey and Russia agreed to build a nuclear plant in Turkey this decade. Nuclear power may or may not make economic sense for earthquake-prone, resource-poor Turkey, given that it straddles major energy transit lines. Nuclear technology presents an entirely separate strategic calculation. The Iranian example shows that nuclear enrichment capabilities are best won quietly, a task for which Erdogan is well suited. But as Turkey seeks a leading and aggressive Muslim identity, loosening Western ties, will Erdogan see Turkey's safety or prestige ensured by having nuclear weapons only in the hands of Russians, Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis, and Western powers—and likely Iran's as well?

Today Turkey and Iran pursue their regional ambitions with a watchful eye on the interests of greater outside powers. At the moment, there is a powerful and growing belief in the region that the United States is withdrawing—not only from Iraq, but from any forceful role in the region. This may not properly reflect President Obama’s policy; and even if it did, some may claim it is not possible for years to come. However, there is enough ambiguity, for example, in our policies toward Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Israel, to inflame our enemies and cause uncertainty among our friends. They know the perversity of this region where persistent efforts may win gains, while lesser efforts likely fail. On the occasion of Ahmadinejad’s Lebanese tour, for instance, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared, “We would hope that no visitor would do anything or say anything that would give cause to greater tension or instability in that country.” Many in the region share that hope, but they will be most interested in what deeds accompany our words.

Looking at Western European states, the Middle East cannot help but see rising domestic Muslim constituencies and declining interest in international efforts that might clash with determined Islamist aims. It also sees Russia, China, and India becoming more assertive, not to mention more willing to bargain for their own ends. This reflects not only these nations’ growing power in the world but also their increasing interest in energy resources, transportation infrastructure, and the heightened regional roles of states closer to them—states like Turkey and Iran.

So the Great Powers offer (or just as importantly, seem to offer) the leaders of Turkey and Iran new pieces in a game long played in the lands that stretch from the Bosphorus to the Straits of Hormuz. For example, the new Turkish national security strategy reportedly will remove Russia from its list of enemies, and Russia and Turkey are focused on pipelines critical to both that would have enormous strategic impact on Europe. Meanwhile, Iran has used Russian and Chinese interests to forestall UN sanctions. Even in earlier days, the Ottomans or Persians time and again allied with Russia to struggle against one another. The region is practiced in such maneuvers.

Turkey and Iran may yet follow anti-Western paths more similar than not. American problems might deepen if Turkey or Iran manipulates outside powers for support. Recently Turkey staged one of its regular “Anatolian Eagle” joint military maneuvers. This time, atypically, American and Israeli forces were absent, replaced by Chinese planes and pilots. The Chinese reached Turkey by flying, with Tehran’s permission, through Iranian airspace.

Dealing with this new configuration of power and ambition calls for a determined policy by America, one that deals realistically with the landscape we face, not the one we wish for. There are prospects for us in this landscape, but diplomacy, however adept, will accomplish little if, correctly or incorrectly, the region doubts our will to follow through.

In the 1930s, Ataturk admonished Turks to free their public life from dysfunctional ways. He warned that the choice was not ideological or aesthetic but pragmatic. “Civilization,” he said, “is a fearful fire which consumes those who ignore it.” And fire spreads—

especially when fed by a volatile mix of gas, oil, religion, and ambition.

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