

A TURKISH PERSPECTIVE ON SECURITY ISSUES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

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ABSTRACT The Mediterranean is where the atmosphere of mutual distrust, fear and polarization prevail. Arab-Israeli dispute and Turkish-Greek differences over the Aegean and Cyprus impede efforts for developing mutual confidence and co-operation. Recently, economic and financial crises and the “Arab Risings” have brought along more reasons for concern. Islamophobia and racism versus Islamic jihadism increase the risk of confrontation. Turkey together with Spain appeals for an “Alliance of Civilizations” and exploits its double identity, European and Muslim, through a proactive and multilateral policy for finding peaceful solutions to chronic regional solutions. Greece and Greek Cypriot governments should refrain from unilateral attempts to declare maritime borders.

One could rightly suppose that the Mediterranean (MED) ought to be one of the safest and stable places on earth. All those states in and around it are subscribers of the common vision that is embedded in the Barcelona Process, which has been re-launched recently with an ambitious title, the Union for the MED; and in the dialogue and co-operation scheme of NATO since 1994, both of which are intended to make the MED a basin of peace and stability. Despite all these good intentions and commitments it is far from being so, it is still highly turbulent and quite hot in several places. And, the situation in the Med does not look as though it will get any better.

You might think that it is so because it is too crowded. As the Turkish saying goes, “where there is a crowd there is trouble”. There are 22 littoral and 2 island states, plus the Vatican, Palestine, Gibraltar and the Turkish Republic of Cyprus (TRNC) and also the permanent naval presence of several external powers. Let us admit it, the MED is quite crowded. The heterogeneity of this crowd makes it more problematic. With its mixture of rich and poor, old and young societies, all kinds of Muslims, Christians and the Jews with different values and ambitions, and almost all with an unsettled account of the past, the MED stands for differences. Turkish-Greek disputes over territorial waters, continental shelf and air space together

with the divided Cyprus all compete with the Arab-Israeli issue in their potential for military confrontation. Lately, the situation in the MED has become further complicated by uprisings not only in several Arab countries but also in EU member countries going through difficult times. It looks as if people everywhere are responding to Stephan Hasselt's call "indignez vous".¹ We must also give particular attention to the tragedy in Syria before which so far the whole world seems helpless. It looks as if the Libyans were worth the intervention and the Syrians are not.

By and large the uprisings shed instability and hide a great amount of uncertainty. Both the South and the North may have entered a period of transformation. No one can be sure whether it is for the better or worse.

There are also good things happening. Turkish-Israeli relations, which had been derailed by the late Blue Marmara incident, are back on track. The last good news is that rich hydrocarbon resources have been explored in the Eastern Med. I hope it is good news because it could turn out to be quite the opposite. Since it could serve as a catalyst/an opportunity for overcoming chronic enmities or it may well serve as a spark to put the whole region in fire.

Have I gone too far in drawing a very dark picture? Frankly, I think the MED nowadays is an ideal place for the chaos theorist to deal with. I wish I were one. Since I am not I will offer you my simple

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approach for yourselves to decide whether the situation is really as bad as or not as bad as it looks.

My basic assumption, if you would agree, is that conflict is the end result of untreated and disturbing differences.

Difference by itself is the normal, it is the natural case. The world would not look any better if all of the trees were pine trees. Differences become disturbing when they are abused, competitive or preferential. This is when we begin calling it an issue. The level of disturbance ranges from being bearable to intolerable. If not treated

properly then it becomes a matter of life and death, and that might lead to war.

The best way to treat a disturbing difference is to resolve the issue so that the difference fades away for good. Were it not possible you would want to manage and check it so that the issue becomes endurable, and those who are involved can live with it.

Now, I would like to elaborate on the issues that we are all confronted with and try to give you an idea on how disturbing they look from a Turkish perspective and what Turkey is doing, in its capacity, to manage and check them.

Current State of Affairs; A Deepening Fault Line

The MED is where the atmosphere of mutual distrust, fear and polarization between the Islamic world and the West is perennial and prevalent. It is the same

¹ React, cry out, get mad.



atmosphere which put the parties in opposing camps during the cold war in a compounding way whereby the polarization became more formal and disturbing. Differences of power and level of development, of regime and culture between North and South are all elements of this fault line. These differences came to the forefront as the cold war ended and they needed treatment to avoid undesirable consequences. The Europeans initiated, what is called, a constructive dialogue and it was welcomed by the South. As we all know this initiative evolved as the Barcelona process and eventually transformed into the Union for the MED format. I do not totally agree with those who think that Barcelona Process has not delivered much. What if it was not introduced at all? We would not have NGOs, the media and other networks and formal dialogue, which I am sure are all indispensable assets in managing regional differences. But comparing the speed and scope of treatment which the West afforded to Eastern Europe the Barcelona process is definitely not a success story.

There is no doubt that the Arab–Israeli conflict has been an impediment to resolving the disturbance on both sides caused by North–South differences. “Nothing can be resolved before the Palestine issue is resolved”. “There can be no peace before Israel’s right to exist within 1967 borders is recognized”; until these two conditions, which are contingent on each other, are met North–South differences are bound to remain disturbing for both sides.

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For the time being a confrontation between Israel and Arabs seem to be checked by Israel’s military superiority and the US’ commitment to Israel’s defense. But it does not eliminate the use of asymmetric force by both sides, which thereby continues to generate an explosive situation. For Israel, admittedly, Palestine is no longer an issue. The situation looks unbearable for the Palestinians only and it looks as if no one cares as much as the Turkish government does. I will come back to this later on.

North–South differences have gained an alarming dimension on a religious scale in the aftermath of the horrifying terrorist attacks against the US, known as 9/11.

Islamophobia spread. US President Bush’s declaration of Islam as “the enemy” was a very unfortunate call to position the South as an adversary of the West/North. It must have left a deep mark in Muslim communities throughout the world. The MED was considered as a high threat environment for NATO and a standing flotilla has been deployed there for defense against the terrorist threat ever since. The wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya under the guise of the ‘War Against Terror’, humanitarian intervention and the ensuing instability in these countries nowadays invite questions pertaining to their purpose and legitimacy. The perception of the Southerners might very well be that El-Qaida, Saddam and Kaddafi were the unbearable types who were in defiance of the West and the US. And that the real intention was not to free the people of these countries from their tyrants but to impose their own authority in designing their future. The end result



has turned out to be quite the opposite. As an unanticipated cost the US has lost face and much of its credibility in the region. NATO gained prestige among the Arab countries immediately after the operation in Libya but it may not be the same with regards to Syria. Actually, the wars in Iraq and Libya might have paved the way for current uprisings and prompted polarization on ethnic, tribal and sectarian bases in Arab countries.

In short, religious feuding represents the most dangerous kind of difference and must be avoided by all means. What is worst is that Islamophobia is accompanied by racism which seems to be gaining a new momentum in Europe. If not checked, immigrants from the South will be extremely exposed. Turkey, as the country having the highest number of immigrants in Europe, comparative to its population at home, have all the more reason to be concerned and alarmed by these trends. There are now signs indicating that Turks have already begun fleeing home from Europe. That should be equally worrying for the Europeans.

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That brings us to the uprisings taking place in almost all the MED countries with few exceptions. Uprisings in the Arab countries are different in nature than those in the European countries. But also there are some similarities. Basically, discontent is related to economics and governance on both sides. There are complaints and

oppositions but no propositions. What is being displayed is nothing other than a deep frustration.

The situation in Syria is alarming on this account and bears the risk of spreading region wide. Turkey is naturally most disturbed. The whole world is worried over the possibility of the use of chemical weapons by Assad or by actors who might get a hold of them. Around 200.000 Syrians have taken refuge in Turkey and they are very costly to host, not only in financial terms. There is not much Turkey could do apart from appealing to Assad to stop killing his own people and leaving his office while trying to organize a viable representative opposition. Apparently, in the absence of a UNSC mandate, the EU

and the US have no intention of direct involvement unless chemical weapons were used and Turkey is attacked. NATO contingency. The initiative taken by the Arab League inviting the Arab nations to extend military support to the opposition is unprecedented.

It seems like the inability of the UNSC to mandate an international effort to stop the bloodshed in Syria is thus being compensated for by a regional organization.

Currently, the turmoil that the uprisings generate in Arab countries provides a fertile ground, not only for radicals but also for hungry and desperate ones to grow.

The turmoil in Europe is threatening the cohesion of the European Union. A clear warning came recently from Jean Claude Juncker, former head of Euro Group as he appealed to European leaders saying that the "economic downturn throughout Europe might bring about political ten-

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sions and even the risk of war; the ghosts of the pre WWI are not dead but just asleep. The results of the recent elections in Greece and Italy are indicative of a bursting racism". This may sound very pessimistic but it is equally disturbing.

Where does Turkey stand? A member of NATO and the European Council, an EU candidate but not regarded as European by some Europeans who want Turkey firmly anchored to Europe but kept at arm's length. I remember the resentment felt in Turkey when the Barcelona process was launched and Turkey was subjected to Europe's Mediterranean policy as if Turkey stood in the South. Not much has changed since then in this respect. On the other hand, situated on the margins of the Middle East, Turkey is perceived as European by its Southern neighbors, now that it became a candidate for membership in the EU. With this somewhat controversial/double identity Turkey can afford to act autonomously and follow a multi-dimensional foreign policy in a proactive way, appealing for ethics in international relations.

Having a healthy economy and enjoying a political stability Turkey plays a stabilizing role in its region and has become an attractive strategic partner for all. Turkey is no longer on the receiving side of aid but a provider. Now came a time to hear the European officials admittedly saying that Turkey was implementing the European Neighborhood Policy better than the Europeans. Turkey was being presented as a model for the Arab countries in their democratic transformation.

The Turkish Prime Minister, with his Spanish counterpart, launched an initiative for treating religious polarization and

Islamophobia. The initiative aimed to foster greater cross-cultural tolerance and understanding and was adopted by the UN. Thus far 130 countries joined this initiative as the Group of Friends, developing strategies to prevent a "clash of civilizations".

Turkey is keenly involved in mediations and almost succeeded in getting Israel and Syria to shake hands for a peace deal. This was in 2008. The whole process collapsed when the next day Israel attacked Gaza, breaking its word not to do so. That was the beginning of deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations. Differences between the two countries became more than

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disturbing when Israel attacked the Blue Marmara ship in the aid convoy to Gaza, in international waters killing 9 unarmed people; all Turkish amongst 38 different nationalities, treating

them all as if they were terrorists. Turkey's disturbance has further grown when Israel hurriedly sought military partnership with Greece and the Greek Cypriots. The differences remained solid as a rock, although in the economic field business looked as usual, until two weeks ago when under president Obama's sponsorship Erdoğan and Netanyahu chose to resolve their differences. Hopefully this rapprochement will prompt a new and constructive process for a just and lasting peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, in which Turkey can play a role. The two countries can now co-operate in managing the crises in Syria and together they can work to find a way to optimize the rich oil and gas resources Israel discovered to the benefit of all.



Greece-Turkey Differences

It is time for a few words on Greece-Turkey differences. These two nations love playing “0 sum games”. They had a bitter struggle over the heritage of the Ottoman Empire. They still debate heatedly over coffee, musakka, dolma, and cacik, both claiming ownership. Nevertheless differences over such things whether they are Turkish or Greek have become quite tolerable. But when the subject matter is the Aegean Sea, the atmosphere becomes rather hostile. It is because their differences over the Aegean Sea are related to sovereignty over maritime areas and therefore involve vital interests. Maritime borders between the two countries have yet to be drawn and there are conflicting claims over certain rocks and islets such as Kardak, or Imnia as the Greeks call it.

The fundamental source of tension between Turkey and Greece is the Greek perception that the entire Aegean is a Greek sea in total disregard of Turkey’s rights and interests as one of the two littoral states.

The Lozan Peace Treaty (1924), which concluded both the I WW and Turkish-Greek war while at the same time became the founding act of the Turkish Republic, had to strike a perfect balance between Greece and Turkey. This balance was broken first in 1936 when Greece extended its territorial waters from 3 to 6 miles in the climate of approaching the II WW. In the honeymoon spirit of the time, with regards to its relations with Greece, Turkey, without giving it a second thought, did not object and years later responded in kind. What actually happened was that Greece’s share in the Aegean went up to 43.5% and Turkey’s to 7.5%. If Greece were now to claim 12 miles these figures would be 71.5% and 8.8% respectively. Thus Greek aspirations over the Aegean

would be fulfilled and Turkey would be confined to its coastal waters and deprived of free access to the high seas and international airspace, and from having a just share of its continental shelf. Turkey is not prepared to repeat the mistake made in 1936. Therefore, a unilateral attempt by Greece to increase its territorial waters in the Aegean Sea beyond 6 miles is totally unacceptable to Turkey. Differences over the airspace, the FIR and militarization of certain islands, and conflicting claims over islets are, in one way or another, associated with the delineation of maritime borders i.e. territorial waters and the continental shelf.

There is no doubt that the events that have taken place in Cyprus have had a deep negative impact in Turkish-Greek relations. The risk of conflict has been high and alive as Turkish and Greek aircraft and navy saber rattle each other in and over the Aegean. The Kardak crises must have made the parties realize how close they were to war. Then the terrible earthquakes happened, first in Turkey and soon after in Greece. Both sides rushed to each other’s help. Things have been much better since then. The differences over the Aegean and all other issues are being treated through direct contacts. Structured meetings are expected to lead the parties to a legal solution. Even if the two NATO member states cannot achieve a settlement soon, they have learned how to live with their differences by now.

The Cyprus Issue

The Cyprus issue is another chapter of Turkish-Greek differences. In a snapshot review: it all began in 1963, only 3 years after the composite state of Cyprus was established, when Greek Cypriots (GC)



kicked the Turkish Cypriots (TC) out of the state structure and began terrorizing the Turkish community by committing atrocities. The situation became intolerable for Turkey when in 1974 GC attempted to unite with Greece and the survival of Turkish community was put in danger. Turkey intervened as one of the guarantor states, and carried out a “peace making” operation. GC fled to the south and TC fled to the north and the bi-communal island became bi-zonal as well. The UN moved in for peace keeping. Since then peace prevails in Cyprus.

UN forces needed a local authority to be in touch with for its day to day activities. The UN designated the GC government for this purpose. All of a sudden the GC government became the sole representative of Cyprus throughout the world except for in Turkey. In return, TC announced the establishment of their own state, the TRNC, which is recognized only by Turkey. TC has been penalized unjustly by a brutal embargo ever since.

UN sponsored negotiations for a settlement over a federal solution have not been successful. EU membership offer did not work out as an incentive to reach an agreement in the UN (Annan) Plan. On the contrary GC, ensured of membership, had no need for agreeing on a federal solution. In a simultaneous referendum that TC accepted, GC said “no” to the plan. Obviously, in their view TC have to be satisfied with being a minority. Disturbance thus expanded over to Turkish-EU relations.

The situation may not have had a serious security dimension if the GC government had not begun to make maritime delimitation agreements, and issue permits for oil and gas explorations, which Turkey considers null and void. In our view, GC does not represent the whole island, and TC also has a right over the natural resources

of the island and its waters. UN comprehensive settlement plan (2004) reflected the same understanding.

As a response TRNC started explorations both overland and at sea and issued permits in areas overlapping with those of GC’s. Furthermore, GC claimed areas overlaps with those which Turkey believes are its own in south west of Cyprus where Turkey would not allow any exploration to take place. This should be enough to indicate how confrontational the maritime situation is.

Nevertheless, the gas and oil to be explored would need a practical transit to potential markets. On this point Turkey stands as the ideal choice if not the only practical and feasible one for the oil and gas to transit through. There is much for the parties to gain from co-operation and too much to lose from confrontation. With fresh water soon to be directly connected from Turkey to the island there is more than one reason for prudence to prevail over confrontation in times of unprecedented austerity

Summary

To sum up, it can be said that religious intolerance accompanied by the rise of racism, coupled with uncertainties associated with the uprisings constitutes the most worrying region wide security concern in the Med.

The situation in Syria requires the most urgent treatment before it gets completely out of control.

Initiatives taken by GC leadership to conclude maritime delimitation agreements and to begin issuing permits for drilling oil in these contested areas bear the risk of confrontation with Turkey. Lebanon and Egypt have shown the



sensibility that the consequences require by withdrawing from the delimitation agreements they made with Cyprus. Greece and Cyprus would be well advised to refrain from unilaterally announcing maritime zones in areas adjacent to Turkey in order to avoid a clash of vital interests.

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Lieutenant General Şadi Ergüvenç (ret.) graduated from the Air Force School in 1957 and completed his academic education at the Air Force Academy, the Armed Forces Academy and the Royal Airforce Staff College in the United Kingdom. His previous positions include: the Head of the Intelligence Department at The National Security Council Secretariat and the Strategy and Force Planning Division at the General Staff; the Turkish Military Representative within NATO Military Committee; and the Commander of the Second Tactical Air Force. Since his retirement in 1992 he has remained active in numerous national and international institutions, including the NATO Defense College and the Foreign Policy Institute.

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