

Turkey: NATO's Policeman in the Middle East

NATO's Arm, the Neo-Ottomans

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Turkey does not get its reputation from the history of its empire, despite the theories of its Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and despite the attempt to renew Ottomanism and return to the country's roots and to its neighborhood, after the illusion of exile to Europe. Neither does it get its reputation from the history of its army, which ruled it and upheld "its secularism and its democracy" until the Justice and Development Party (AKP - Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) came to power, nor from oppressing Kurds and forbidding them from speaking their language.

Turkey gets its reputation and its power from being the second military force in the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO). In other words, Turkey is the arm of the Europeans and the Americans in the Middle East, not to say the policeman entrusted with guarding Western interests, without being accepted into the European Union because of its ancient and modern Islamic history. And it is well known that the United States has always been exerting pressures on the EU in favor of Ankara, and that France and Germany were those most opposed to its entry into the Union.

The Middle East's policeman had also not been accepted in the region when the military controlled its political fate, and had adopted a path opposed to Arab causes, with the Palestinian Cause at their forefront. In fact, Turkey's military went as far as sealing a strategic alliance with the Hebrew state in order to confront any Arab attempt to rise up.

Such recent history could not be erased by the leader of the ruling AKP party Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. His stances on Shimon Peres at the Davos forum, as well as his stance on the Gaza war, were only attempts at distinguishing himself from the Europeans and the Americans in order to prove that he had a regional role to play, without this meaning to depart from the interests of both, especially when it comes to issues that have a direct impact on his own domestic situation, such as his stance on the Iraq war.

Based on such a stance, Erdoğan started, from the first day of the events in Syria, behaving on the basis that this was an "internal Turkish matter". He thus went on to exercise his policies on this basis. He hosted conferences for the Syrian opposition and adopted its slogans. Moreover, he contributed to shaping an Arab and international public opinion opposed to the Syrian regime, making use of the presence of those displaced from Jisr Al-Shughur on Turkish soil near the Syrian border.

Erdoğan was coordinating each of the steps he was taking with the United States and Europe, believing that the Syrian regime was doomed to fall, wagering on playing a role in shaping another regime that would succeed that of Assad, and presenting himself as a model of “democratic” Islamists acceptable to the West. And after the events developed and reached what they have in Syria, he was systematically used by the Americans to convey messages to Assad – messages that could be summed up as “reform now or leave”. He is well aware that such a condition cannot be fulfilled. The violence will not stop, because it has gone beyond the phase of confrontation between security forces and peaceful protesters to one between armed fighters whom Damascus calls “terrorists” and the army. Another reason is that reform “now” is not possible in Syria, nor in any other country. Moreover, the promises made by Assad and the laws he is drafting are not being accepted by the opposition nor by Western countries, which considered them to be “provocation”, as French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé said.

It is not true that Davutoğlu did not convey an American message to Assad. And it is not true that the warning directed at him by Erdoğan of “reform within 15 days or face dire consequences” was a warning from Ankara alone. Rather, such a warning sums up the stances of the Europeans and the Americans, and those of the Arabs as well, however with a Turkish Islamic eloquence which both the West and the East understand. Moreover, the United States would prefer to arrive at consensus by “the international community, including Arab countries”, for many reasons, most importantly the fact that it does not want to take decisions “unilaterally”. Indeed, the US has learned from its experience in Iraq. And here it is waging the war in Libya with NATO forces and the support of some Arab countries, without bearing the blame alone for killing civilians and for the failure of the war to topple Gaddafi and spread democracy.

Turkey is preparing itself to lead change in Syria and in the Middle East, believing itself to be qualified to do so. Indeed, it is acceptable for both the Muslim World and the West, and its relations with Israel no longer represent an obstacle after “the threat of the Hebrew state has gone”, in addition to the fact that its situation is ideal for confronting Iran and its influence.

Turkey has returned to the region through the Syrian gateway, and it has the ambition of consecrating its leadership status by changing a regime that does not agree with its “democratic Islamism”, nor with its role as NATO’s arm. As for the legitimate and urgent demands of Syrians, neither Erdoğan, nor the United States, nor Europe will fulfill them.

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