

The Turkish Paradigm

Identity, as defined by place and language, is a Western concept, not an Arab or Islamic one. In the Middle East, identity is defined by religion and then by genealogy, which can become ethnicity. Just over a century ago, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, borrowed the Arabic word *watan* (nation) and modified it in order to instill that Western concept of patriotism to a geographic entity. He and his associates created a new Turkish identity – a loyalty to a land – from the decaying remnants of the Ottoman Empire.

Atatürk's staunch liberalism is starkly different from the Islamic-rooted conservatism of his modern counterpart, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But in one crucial sense Erdogan is following in the footsteps of Atatürk: he, too, is attempting to reinvent a new Turkish identity – one that is more assertive and self confident.

This is a quiet revolution aimed at transforming the secular constitution domestically, and at returning to Turkey's traditional role in terms of foreign policy. This does not mean that the Ottoman Empire will be reconstituted any time soon, but it does underscore a public debate that has taken stock of failures in the West and gains in the East. Specifically, Erdogan and his government see Turkey's future as being more naturally aligned to the Middle East – as the major equity partner within a Muslim alliance – rather than as the unwelcome guest at the EU Christian club or as the junior partner of the United States.

Today, Turkey is all grown up, sporting the seventh largest economy in Europe and the sixteenth largest economy in the world. The country has the second largest army in NATO after the United States and is strategically placed, with the former Soviet Union to the north and the Middle East to the south.

Turkey is coming into its own diplomatically as well, and has already shown that it has the political maturity and the clout to act as broker for various disputes. Before the Gaza conflict of 2006, it showed willingness to act as a mediator between the Israeli government of Ehud Olmert and Syria's Bashar al-Assad over the occupied Golan. More recently, Turkey negotiated the agreement, along with Brazil, to trade Iran's low-enriched uranium for higher enriched fuel bars to be used in a research reactor in Tehran. When that deal was unceremoniously trashed by the leading powers, Turkey's obstructionism in the Security Council proved so effective that the permanent members of the Council could only agree to a watered-down and surpassingly weak set of sanctions on Iran.

Turkey's growing divergence with the West over Gaza and Iran stems from a desire to reestablish its role as a major influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. In terms of economic ties, for example, trade between Turkey and the 22 member countries of the Arab League has more than doubled over the past five years to just under \$30 billion; and last month, Ankara announced plans to create a free trade and travel zone with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

But it is the reaction to Turkey's stand against Israel that has had dramatic implications, both internal and external. Internally, it has brought on a new wave and brand of nationalism that seeks to rekindle Ottoman glory and reestablish a link between the state and religion.

Beyond the borders, Turkey's newfound prestige is evident from the sudden popularity in Turkish flags, brandished outside the United Nations headquarters in Beirut to the shantytowns and camps of Gaza to bumper stickers in the Gulf.

To be sure, Erdogan is neither as charismatic as Atatürk nor does he have the necessary Arab credentials to become the new Gamal Abdel Nasser. But there is a vacuum in the Arab world for real political leadership, which could provide his stature with enough room to grow.

By siding so openly with Palestinians, Turkey has gone from a tepid observer to an influential player. Of course, Erdogan is not acting purely out of humanitarian concern for Gaza; and the outrage of the continuing blockade of the Strip inflames people in Western capitals just as much as those on the streets of Istanbul and Ankara.

But what is at stake is the very notion of identity and loyalty. Beyond the diplomatic speak aimed at smoothing ruffled feathers, it has become clear that Ankara and Washington are at opposite ends on virtually all the regional issues, from Palestine to Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. After six decades of strategic cooperation, Turkey and the United States have officially become strategic competitors in the Middle East. By emphasizing its return to a traditional view of identity, especially as defined by religion, Turkey is hoping that the gamble will pay off and that Muslim states will buy into their redefined *watan*.
