

Analysis

July 28, 2010

Summary: On July 28, 2010, Dr. Ian Lesser testified before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs regarding Turkey's evolving foreign policy and the implications for American interests and strategy. His testimony explains that the changes in Turkish foreign policy are the product of long simmering forces in Turkish society, the particular affinities and concerns of Turkey's political leadership, and the rise of public opinion as a factor in Turkish policymaking. In a new move away from the arms-length policy toward its eastern and southern neighborhood, Turkey's current leadership is much more comfortable than its predecessors in conducting an active diplomacy across the Arab and Muslim worlds. This shift will be consequential for U.S. interests across a wide area, from European security to relations with Russia, from energy geopolitics to missile defense. It will also affect Turkey's future role in relation to core regional concerns, above all the containment of Iran's nuclear ambitions and the Middle East peace process.

Turkey's New Foreign Policy Direction and Implications for U.S. Policy

Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

by *Dr. Ian Lesser*

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to share my views on Turkey's evolving foreign policy and the implications for American interests and strategy. With your permission, I will offer a brief summary of my remarks. Let me also note that these are my personal views and not those of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

Significant and Durable Policy Shifts

First, I believe that the changes in Turkish foreign policy are the product of long simmering forces in Turkish society, the particular affinities and concerns of Turkey's political leadership, and the rise of public opinion as a factor in Turkish policymaking. All of these elements have been at play in Ankara's recent and controversial actions, including the Gaza "flotilla crisis" and Turkey's "no" vote on Iran sanctions in the UN Security Council. Today, Turkey's international policy is more active and diverse, and much of this new activity is focused on the Middle East and Eurasia. There is an important commercial dimension to this activism, fueled by impressive economic growth (around 7 percent) even in the midst of a global crisis. All

of this has contributed to the self-confidence of the AKP leadership. It has also produced a relative decline in Turkish interest in and attention to the EU, NATO, and the strategic partnership with the United States. In my judgment, these are durable rather than transient developments.

Second, there is no doubt that Turkey's current leadership is much more comfortable than its predecessors in conducting an active diplomacy across the Arab and Muslim worlds. This is new, and represents a move away from the arms-length policy toward its eastern and southern neighborhood that characterized Turkish policy since the end of the Ottoman Empire. Turkish public opinion increasingly reflects this new interest in the Middle East. Based on a preliminary analysis of this year's GMF Transatlantic Trends survey data, we found that the percentage of those in Turkey who say that, on international matters, Turkey should act in closest cooperation with the countries of the Middle East has roughly doubled since last year.¹

¹ GMF's Transatlantic Trends is an annual survey of public opinion conducted in the U.S. and 12 European countries, including Turkey. Transatlantic Trends 2010 findings will be released on September 15, 2010. www.transatlantic-trends.org



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But attention to the Middle East is not the only element in a changing Turkish foreign policy. Increasingly, AKP leaders and their foreign policy advisors talk in terms strongly reminiscent of other emerging economic and political actors, including India, South Africa, Indonesia, and Brazil. In this context, Turkish-Brazilian diplomatic cooperation on Iran has not been so surprising. This new tendency, not so much neo-Ottoman as non-aligned, reflects a strong sense of skepticism in many Turkish quarters about foreign and defense policies “made in the West.” On balance, Turkey remains a cautious and status quo actor in international affairs — this is most evident in Ankara's conservative approach to change in NATO — but the trend is clearly toward a more assertive policy across Turkey's neighborhood.

The New Turkey and American Interests

Third, these shifts will be consequential for U.S. interests across a wide area, from European security to relations with Russia, from energy geopolitics to missile defense. They will also affect Turkey's future role in relation to core regional concerns, above all the containment of Iran's nuclear ambitions and the Middle East peace process. But it is important to recognize that the new look in Turkish policy has had some positive dimensions from the point of view of American interests alongside some more troubling aspects. On the positive side, Turkey appears committed to the consolidation of détente with Greece and stability in the Aegean. Disputes in the Aegean and over Cyprus have not been resolved, yet today, they are largely political rather than security challenges for the United States and our European allies. In the Balkans, Turkey has pursued a constructive and multilateral policy. Turkey has been an important part

of coalition operations in Afghanistan, and led the ISAF mission in its early days. On Iraq, Ankara might not have been willing to allow a second front to be opened through its territory in 2003. But Turkey has quietly allowed the United States to use Incirlik airbase for airlift to Iraq and Afghanistan. In northern Iraq, Ankara has been playing a positive role, and cooperation in this sphere will be even more important as Turkey seeks to contain a resurgence of violence by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party).

To be sure, there has been a steady decline in the weight of traditional Atlantic ties in Turkish policy, and the flywheel of transatlantic partnership as a source of predictability in Turkish-U.S. relations. At the same time, there has been a rise in Turkish nationalism across the political spectrum, and this has reinforced a sovereignty-conscious approach in key areas, including security in the Black Sea, where Ankara is wary of an enhanced U.S. and NATO role. In the Middle East, the United States and Turkey share a basic interest in stability, but we are clearly not on the same page when it comes to the key questions of Iran policy and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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Turkey has a strong interest in preventing the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran and the rise of new nuclear arsenals in its neighborhood. Even a “nuclearizing” or near-nuclear Iran would have negative consequences for Turkish security. Turkish policymakers may have strong energy security and commercial interests in cooperation with Tehran, but they remain wary of Iran's potential as a regional competitor.



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That said, the AKP leadership does not seem to share the prevailing U.S. and European assessment of Iran's intentions, and Turks across the spectrum are opposed to economic sanctions, which they are convinced will harm Turkey's economic interests. Despite Turkey's own direct exposure to Iranian (and Syrian) weapons of mass destruction and the means for their delivery at longer ranges, the Turkish debate on these questions tends to be political rather than strategic in nature. Turkey's leaders argue for a nuclear-free Middle East, and point to Israel's undeclared nuclear capability as part of the problem. These perspectives are clearly out of step with the views of transatlantic partners. Short of an overt Iranian threat to Turkish security, U.S. and Turkish views on the Iran nuclear issue are unlikely to converge. Against this background, Turkey's "no" vote on Iran sanctions in the UN Security Council was not surprising.

The Gaza flotilla incident underscored another important shift in Turkish perceptions and policy. A crisis of this kind would have been unthinkable ten years ago, when Turkish-Israeli relations were far closer and the Turkish military held sway over the country's foreign and security policy. In my judgment, the erosion of Turkish-Israeli strategic cooperation was inevitable. The "strategic partnership" was a product of distinctive circumstances in the 1990s, including a shared interest in the containment of Syria and Iran, and a setting in which Turkish public opinion — never very positive about relations with Israel — did not really count. Today, all of these conditions have changed, and the basis for Turkish-Israeli cooperation is much narrower. Above all, the Palestinian issue is a highly emotive one for Turkey's current political leadership, and especially for Prime Minister Erdogan. His strong views on the subject are essentially in tune with Turkish public opinion. AKP leaders refer openly to Hamas as a legitimate interlocutor. The Turkish position on Hamas and other aspects of the Middle East peace process is unlikely to change anytime soon. In this, as in some other key areas, the United States and Turkey are simply unlikely to agree.

Policy Implications

Taken together, these developments will pose continued challenges for American policy. We are used to viewing Turkey from a NATO-centric, European security perspec-

tive, and while these aspects remain relevant, they are only part of the Turkish policy picture. What Turkey does or does not do in the Middle East and Eurasia will be just as important for U.S. interests in the years ahead.

It is important to remember that U.S.-Turkish relations have never been easy to manage, and have experienced repeated periods of stress, alongside periods of close cooperation. U.S.-Turkish relations have always suffered from their geopolitical, security-heavy content, in which the economic, scientific, cultural, and other dimensions have been relatively weak. This is a structural problem, difficult to correct, and a particular liability as Turkey's international activism is increasingly driven by commercial factors. Almost certainly, we are moving into a period of declining predictability in relations with Ankara, with a *la carte* rather than automatic cooperation as the norm.

Let me conclude by noting some critical priorities for U.S. policy. First, with Ankara, we need to shift the debate on Iran (and the Middle East generally) from politics to defense, where Turkey has its own exposure and concerns. Looking toward the NATO summit in Lisbon in November, it will be important to secure Turkish cooperation for the next steps in a ballistic missile defense architecture covering southern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean.

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Second, we need to rethink and possibly reinforce our cooperation with Turkey against the PKK and its bases of operation across the border in Iraq. In the absence of close coordination, there is a real possibility of larger-scale



independent Turkish operations in northern Iraq, a development which could derail Turkish-Iraqi relations and complicate the outlook for stability in Iraq as a whole. More significantly, our policy may need to respond to a potential expansion of PKK-inspired urban terrorism inside Turkey. This could imply very different kinds of intelligence sharing and other forms of cooperation with Turkish agencies. The Kurdish issue is the leading policy challenge facing Turkey today, and U.S. and European policies in this sphere will be key tests for Turkey in its relations with Western partners.

Finally, the United States remains a key stakeholder in Turkey's European Union candidacy. This process is increasingly troubled, with growing ambivalence and opposition on all sides. It is too simple to blame the lack of progress in Turkey's European project for Ankara's growing focus on the Middle East. But if Turkey's candidacy proves hollow, this could well interrupt or reverse Turkey's longstanding convergence with the West, further complicating an already strained relationship with the United States. Full membership in Europe has been the leading "big project" in Turkish policy. Without this goal, there will be a heightened risk of Turkey's strategic decoupling from the transatlantic community. Our support for Turkey's European trajectory — critical to the resolution of the Cyprus dispute, closer NATO-EU cooperation, and Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, among other issues — should not be diminished by recent U.S.-Turkish differences over Iran and Israel.

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As a senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington, DC, Ian Lesser leads GMF's work on the Mediterranean, Turkish, and wider-Atlantic security issues. Prior to joining GMF, Dr. Lesser was a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and vice president and director of Studies at the Pacific Council on International Policy (the western partner of the Council on Foreign Relations). He came to the Pacific Council from RAND, where he spent over a decade as a senior analyst and research manager specializing in strategic studies. From 1994-1995, he was a member of the Secretary's Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. Department of State, responsible for Turkey, Southern Europe, North Africa, and the multilateral track of the Middle East peace process. He is also currently a senior advisor to the Luso-American Foundation in Lisbon, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Atlantic Council, and the Pacific Council on International Policy. He serves on the advisory boards of the International Spectator, Turkish Policy Quarterly, and Insight Turkey, and has been a senior fellow of the Onassis Foundation in Athens.

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