

Graham E. Fuller

The New Turkish Republic : Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World
(Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008, 196pp.)

Graham Fuller has written a very useful analysis of the foreign policy options facing Turkey. Basically, there have been three Turkish Republics. The first was created by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk after the First World War. He built on late reform movements within the Ottoman Empire but centered all his attention on the modernization of Turkey. The Arab lands which had belonged to the Ottomans were under the control of France and England while Arabia was taken over by the Saudi family. For Ataturk, modernization was to copy Western European laws, military training and technology while avoiding European political influence. Ataturk's style of government was authoritarian and reforms were top-down.

During the 1930s with growing dangers from the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, Turkey followed a foreign policy of neutrality with its attention focused on European issues. This policy followed through the Second World War.

In 1950 began the Second Turkish Republic, although it was only slightly different from Ataturk's. There was greater internal democracy with the growth of a plurality of political parties — all of which followed the Kemalist tradition with a strong military as the backbone of national unity. The major foreign policy change was to join NATO — the US-led alliance. Turkey's military received its weapons and training from the USA and joined into other defense alliances with the USA. For the Arab states Turkey was seen as an agent of US policy and a threat. For most Turks, the Arabs were a people they knew too well from the Ottoman period, and they did not like them very much. Of more interest were the non-Arab Muslim states of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan with which there were historic and cultural ties.

With the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 starts the third Turkish Republic and its more diverse foreign policy. It is this third Republic and its foreign policy that is the focus of Fuller's analysis although he rightly stresses the impact of the past and the continuities in Turkish attitudes.

With the end of the Soviet Union, the NATO-US focus of Turkish foreign policy also ends or is deeply modified. Joining the economic growth of Western Europe becomes a priority. There are a large number of Turkish workers living in Germany and France. Increasingly the second and third generations of workers are integrated into Western European society and through education have more skilled jobs. Turkey has started the process of joining the European Union and has modified internal labor and health standards to EU norms. The process of joining the EU is long, and there are some in Western Europe who oppose EU membership — the population of Turkey being too large and too rural (and probably too Muslim for some.)

While the different administrations in Turkey have been agreed on a Western European orientation, there are also new opportunities for Turkey in other directions. Russia is no longer a threat but a business partner, primarily for energy but also for Turkish exports and building contracts. Iran is also a growing business partner, and Iran needs all the friends it can find. Despite very different orientations concerning religion, Turkey and Iran can develop business interests. Both states also have a common interest in having stability in Iraq.

In the Middle East, Turkey has developed extensive trade and cooperation with Israel, even if at a popular level there is wide sympathy for the fate of the Palestinians. There is increased Turkish trade and investment in the Arab Middle East and an increasing number of Turkish workers in the Gulf States.

Of the Central Asian States of the former Soviet Union, four are ethnically Turkic: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as well as some groups in Afghanistan and the Uyghur of China. In the early 1990s, there were some in Turkey who saw Central Asia as a whole new area of business and cultural interests. However, the authoritarian and highly personalized governments of Central Asia made business difficult — more government-to-government contracts, especially in the energy field rather than a possibility for individual businesses. However, there have been extensive Turkish activities in education and culture.

It is the issue of Kurdish autonomy and culture and especially the growing powers of the Iraqi Kurds which poses the greatest strain on Turkish foreign policy. At the end of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, Kemal Ataturk wanted to create a Turkish “nation state” — his model being a superficial historical image of France. Thus, for the first Turkish Republic, everyone was a Turk even if they had forgotten the fact — the Kurds were the “mountain Turks”. However, by insisting on Turkish identity, there was a backlash and the “discovery” of a Kurdish identity. Kurdish identity in Turkey grew as there were also Kurds in Iraq and Syria who were not forced to be “Arabs” and Kurds in Iran who were not told to be Persians. The Kurds have had real difficulties in Iraq and Iran and to a lesser extent in Syria, but their identity was not called into question. Among some Kurds, there grew up a Pan-Kurdish movement which wanted to create a unified Kurdistan out of the Kurdish areas of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Thus the Kurds have been considered dangerous “separatists” in all these countries and often repressed.

Turkey, from the mid-1980s, carried out an extensive military campaign against the Marxist-influenced Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) with a heavy loss of life and destruction of villages. As Fuller points out “The Kurdish problem plays a hugely disproportionate and obsessional role in Turkish foreign policy thinking. Part of Turkey’s difficulty with the Kurds lies in the transnational dimension of the problem... Turkey possesses the largest Kurdish population, which numbers at least 12 million and makes up at least 20 percent of Turkey’s population. Half of the Kurds are located in the east and southeastern regions of the country; the rest are scattered throughout western Turkey: Istanbul is the biggest Kurdish city in the world.”

As a result of the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam’s control over Iraq’s Kurdish region was decisively broken and an autonomous Kurdish region was created which has grown stronger after the 2003 Gulf War. The PKK which had lost much of its influence in Turkey was able to move some fighters into the mountainous and largely empty areas of northern Iraq. The PKK sends small raiding parties to attack Turkish soldiers near the frontier and to place land mines. Turkey has moved some 100,000 troops to the Iraq frontier to block the PKK and has sent warplanes to bomb what may be training camps. Military tensions, however, have not stopped Turkish businesses from investing in the Kurdish areas of Iraq and to carry on building operations.

Today, the New Turkish Republic is pragmatic, business-oriented and carries out largely independent relations with Western Europe, Russia, Iran, and the Arab Middle East. It

is no longer dependent on the USA for its security, but Turkey still wishes to have good relations with the USA. The future of Iraq is of concern to both Turkey and the USA and cooperation on Iraq would be useful.

Fuller has written a clear presentation of Turkey's foreign policy options and related them to Turkish culture and history.

Rene Wadlow

