



18 July, 2007

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INSTITUTE REPORT

ROUND TABLE ON "TURKEY"

EUISS Conference in Paris on 29 June 2007

On 29 June 2007 the EUISS organised a '*Round Table on Turkey*' in order to evaluate the current situation in the country (especially in view of the recent mass demonstrations and the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections) and to explore the question of whether the EU has a role to play. The seminar was organised with a simplified structure, i.e. only two long sessions so as to provide plenty of time for discussion. It has to be seen as complementary to the Institute's new publication on this topic, namely *Occasional Paper* no. 67, 'Crisis in Turkey: just another bump on the road to Europe?', which was being printed at the time of the conference.¹

Crisis or not?

Surprisingly, participants debated whether a crisis existed at all, and if so how deep it was. One speaker described the current situation as the culmination of a deep institutional crisis going back to 1982/3, when the military created the current constitutional and institutional framework. According to this point of view, the murder of Hrant Dink, an Armenian journalist slain in January this year, is a symptom of this crisis as it has revealed the careless and nonchalant approach of the Turkish state in persecuting the murderers. But nothing illustrates the breakdown of the post-*coup d'état* political system more clearly than the crisis developing around the election of the president. When the military wrote the constitution after the 1980 *coup d'état*, it could not imagine that anybody who was not an ex-military would ever run for president. However this did in fact happen, although former presidents, and definitely the current president, were committed Kemalists, who would thus never challenge the sacrosanct role played by the military in Turkey's political system.² Hence Abdullah Gül's candidacy was inevitably going to be a major irritant for the military, as the military doubts his commitment to Kemalism.

These institutional issues aside, another view was presented according to which the current crisis in Turkey is essentially an identity crisis or, to be more precise, a crisis revolving around identity issues. Recently various factors such as EU membership, the issue of the Kurds, the Alevites etc, have called into question what has been seen as a common

¹ Walter Posch, 'Crisis in Turkey: just another bump on the road to Europe?', *Occasional Paper* no. 67, (Paris: EUISS, June 2007) available at <<http://www.iss.europa.eu/occasion/occ67.pdf>>

² On the military and Kemalism see Walter Posch, 'Ideology and the ongoing crisis in Turkey', available at <http://www.iss.europa.eu/new/analysis/analy168e.html>

homogeneous view of Turkish identity, thus provoking a new brand of Turkish nationalism. Intertwined with this is the question of the rise of other elites, which many see as being politically too close to Islamism. Many of these elites do not pass through the Turkish university system but go directly to Western, mostly American, universities.

Another sign of a Turkish 'regime crisis' is the rise of the AKP and its predecessors the Welfare Party (RP) and Virtue Party (FP). This has been presented as a result of the military's condoning political Islam in the aftermath of the 1980 intervention, because this happened against the background of the Islamisation of Turkish society, which enabled new elites to emerge. This tendency was reinforced due to the fact that secular elites were divided by infighting in the 1990s, something that coincided with the rise of new elites sympathetic to the AKP. Yet still the AKP does not command an absolute majority, something that is only possible due to the undemocratic 10% barrier, which has created political 'camps'. Some put the blame for creating these camps on the staunch Kemalists of the CHP, others on the AKP, but what is clear is that this bifurcation of the political landscape is a struggle about who should be entitled to define the fundamentals of the Turkish Republic. There were diverging views on how to what extent the AKP is still a power for democratic transformation; although many maintain, albeit cautiously, that it still is, many caveats and qualifications were expressed. The most important of these is the AKP's rush to implement a new police law whose authoritarian spirit has been criticised. (The police is regarded as being closer to the AKP). Others stressed that the AKP still carries the flag of Europeanisation, thus representing the political views of many in its conservative (but economically liberal) constituency.

And finally there was the question of whether there is actually a crisis at all! As the economy is slowly recovering, investors still trust the commercial environment in Turkey and the Turkish lira has remained surprisingly unaffected by the political development in the country, which is a remarkable novelty. Hence many pragmatic observers detected a sense of unreality and paranoiac fears among the secular public in Turkey – a view that was seriously contested however by many Turkish participants. Others echoed this relaxed view of the situation. According to them there is no crisis of the regime in Turkey. The country has a president and none of the institutional bodies is dysfunctional. Even the decision of the Supreme Court on the minimum quorum in parliament, which many thought was a very ill-advised one, throwing oil on the flames of a tense political situation, cannot be seen as having precipitated a crisis – whether one agrees or disagrees with this decision.

The mass demonstrations

When the military recently mobilised the street against the government, it tried to mobilise the 'camp' opposed to the AKP. This only partially succeeded because as soon as the military tried to utilise the mass demonstrations for its own purposes, namely as an instrument of propaganda against the PKK, many people declined to participate. Many of the protesters belong to a new democratic-oriented secularist middle class (as opposed to the Kemalist middle class). Hence, many participants stressed the voluntary character of the mass demonstrations, especially the first one on 14 April in Tandoğan/Ankara, which were all directed against what appears to be the progressive Islamisation of society and where the demonstrators were defending their values and lifestyles. Turkish participants who had joined some of the demonstrations often told of how surprised they were by many of the slogans and speakers at the meetings and insisted that many of them were too nationalistic and did not represent the prevailing mood and attitudes of the participants. In this context, participants also criticised the AKP's attitude of first ignoring and then not being able to understand the attitude of the protesters.

Turkish nationalism and the Kurdish issue

As has already been mentioned, the political climate has become increasingly nationalistic in the last few years and there is a high percentage of the population (according to various estimates between 40-60%) that simply does not like foreigners; one of the main complaints concerns foreigners buying real estate in Turkey. Some participants talked of a new Turkish nationalism which defines itself as anti-Kurdish, but they were not sure whether this is a temporary phenomenon or whether it is here to stay. Unchecked Turkish nationalism has already reached the level of political decision-shapers and strategists, if not the level of actual decision makers. Several people in think tanks and academia favour an anti-Western alliance between Russia, Turkey and Iran. Others fear that the West is waging a 'war of darkness', i.e. in allusion to the colour revolutions. Some statements by the Turkish Chief of General Staff go in this direction. Yet other Turkish participants underscored the fact that the elites know very well that Turkey's strategic value ultimately lies within its alliance with the West, and also that the statements of such-and-such a general should not be taken too seriously.

Throughout the conference, precisely formulating what the Kurdish issue is really about was carefully avoided. Whatever is clear or not, the state-like entity in northern Iraq plus the infiltration of terrorists means that the Kurdish issue is a prominent and emotionally highly-charged question in Turkey. Thus reaching agreement on pragmatic approaches is more difficult – which is a pity, as one of the participants said, because 20 years ago one could not even publicly say the word 'Kurd', let alone 'Kurdish issue.' It quickly became clear during the debate that the issue *per se* as concerns cultural rights and the like might not be all that difficult to resolve, however the fact that Kurdish national aspirations are equated with PKK terrorism still poses the main serious obstacle to any solution. There was a lack of consensus as concerns the creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. A minority view was that the EU and the US should use whatever remains of their influence in Turkey to convince Ankara to accept the emergence of an independent state of 'Kurdistan' on Iraqi territory, simply because such a reality will emerge anyway. Others saw things differently, suggesting that the EU should issue declarations favouring the territorial unity of Iraq, because in the heated Turkish political atmosphere, many think that the disintegration of Iraq is just a prelude to the splitting-up of Turkey.

Turkey and the EU

Turkish participants unanimously emphasised the fact that the EU played no role at all on the evening of 27 April, the day the military issued its now famous 'memorandum' which is at the origin of the aggravation of the current crisis. Another Turkish participant contended that the sense of the EU's irrelevance was only heightened after the ministerial meeting in June in Brussels.

Another aspect of the crisis is the real costs of EU membership. Last year the costs of economic transformation were about one million jobs lost, and a further million are expected to vanish this year, mostly in the agricultural sector. But retailing too is affected, although this is less due to EU policy than to globalisation – last year alone 90,000 small businesses had to close down. Needless to say frustration over this fuels political discontent but still, pro-EU sentiments seem to be on the rise again, according to one Turkish participant. Others were not so optimistic. After having interviewed the speakers for EU affairs of all major political parties in Turkey, one Turkish researcher drew a sobering picture of their attitudes and commitment towards EU membership: if the AKP stayed in power, one could expect more of the same, i.e. managing the membership process with lukewarm enthusiasm. As for the other

parties, most of them are inclined to campaign for a revision of the framework of negotiations – something the EU will not accept, as other participants were quick to point out. Nevertheless, the Turks would use arguments like the free movement of labour, agricultural funds, the Kurdish issue etc as an argument for altering the framework of negotiations, because many in Turkey see the negotiations as a one-sided series of concessions by Turkey. If the EU were not willing to compromise, the fascist MHP would be in favour of pulling out of talks, the CHP would be for a temporary cessation but not for a total suspension of talks. The Genç Party on the other hand would go for special partnership in any case. Others disputed the position of the CHP by saying that party leader Deniz Baykal would be very pro-European and pointing out that it was actually Bülent Ecevit's government that kicked off the European reforms. There was however a unanimous view that a government relying on the MHP will find it difficult to follow a pro-EU course.

Participants from Europe stressed the fact that the EU only can give a framework of principles on reforms, but not micromanage all the reforms needed, neither in Turkey nor elsewhere. Also the EU definitely has no role to play when it comes to ethnic identity issues. Yet there was unanimous agreement that the EU, including individual member states, should weigh their words carefully and not give the impression that Turkey is not welcome in the EU. As concerns the negotiations it is quite clear that at least 85% of issues under discussion are simply non-negotiable. And this is all the more true for questions of principle, as represented for example by Article 301, here the EU sees no scope for flexibility. But what might be possible is a reaffirmation of common interests, like energy security but also common military operations.

In this context, known Turkish positions on its involvement (or the lack thereof) in the ESDP decision-making process and the country's commitment to NATO and EU membership were reiterated. However, questions concerning the withdrawal of Turkish troops from the Balkans and Afghanistan, were left unanswered.

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