



INSS Insight No. 687, April 20, 2015

Turkey Navigates between East and West, Shiites and Sunnis

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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's one day visit to Iran on April 7, 2015 serves as yet another example of the unscrupulous nature of Turkey's President. However, despite repeated attempts over more than a decade, the Turkish leader has failed to command a central role for his country in a region beset by religious, ethnic, and economic controversies. In an attempt to win on all fronts he has alienated friends and foes, as well as NATO allies. The majority of these NATO allies are also members of the European Union; Turkey has long aspired to become a member of the EU, and at least as far as formal statements are concerned, Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party share this goal.

Just ten days before his visit to Tehran, Erdogan declared that "Iran and the terrorist groups must withdraw" from Yemen. This remark drew a blunt, undiplomatic rejoinder from Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who stated, "It would be better if those who have created irreparable damages with their strategic blunders and lofty politics would adopt responsible policies." Indeed, one can argue that along with Iran's interventionist policy vis-à-vis Syria, Turkey's uncompromising stance regarding the removal of the al-Assad regime, while morally justified, has also contributed to the prolongation of the conflict in Syria.

A few days after returning to Ankara, Erdogan was on the phone with the King of Saudi Arabia and the Emir of Qatar. If his purpose was to mediate between Iran, which backs the Houthis in Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, which leads the intervention to curtail the advancement of the Houthis, he will probably face yet another failure. United Arab Emirates Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Qarqash, called the positions of Turkey (and Pakistan) on Yemen contradictory and vague, and claimed that Iran is more important to these two countries than the Arab Gulf states. He also stated that these contradictory positions prove that Arab security from Libya to Yemen is the responsibility of none but the Arab countries. In his opinion, statements coming from Ankara show coordinated views on Yemen among Iran and Turkey.

If the purpose of Erdogan's visit to Tehran was the potential economic opportunity, given a possible lifting of the sanctions, his success remains to be seen. Erdogan himself stated that a major reason for his short trip was to lower the price Turkey pays for the 10 bcm of natural gas it purchases annually since 2001 from Iran. Turkey requested a price reduction of 25 percent (a request now under international arbitration) but the fact that oil prices, and the prices of natural gas pegged to them, tumbled dramatically in recent months will make it hard for Iran to respond positively. In response, Turkey could opt for importing more gas from Russia, which agreed to reduce the price of gas it sells to Turkey by 10.25 percent, but that would increase the dependency on Russia, which Turkey is loath to do. On the other hand, Iran is likely to become indispensable for Turkey with regard to ground transportation routes, as security concerns make it dangerous for Turkish trucks to pass through Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, the non-renewal of the transportation agreement with Egypt makes this route less relevant, and while the option of docking Turkish trucks at Israel's Haifa port still exists, it is not sufficient. In addition, a giant deal could develop if Iran becomes a partner to the Trans-Anatolian Gas-Pipeline (TANAP) that is designed to transport gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey and from there to Europe. Future political circumstances permitting, Iran will be able to use TANAP to transfer natural gas to Europe. A stake in this project, if offered to Iran, could lead to a strategic partnership.

Still, that is a project that may take years to implement, and while it has the potential of improving Turkey's relations with Europe, the current status is one of tension and adds to an abysmal Turkish record in foreign affairs – certainly far from the objective once set by the current Turkish Prime Minister and former Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, of “zero problems” with the neighbors.

Turkey's dream of becoming an EU member is fast fading away. The difficulties in reaching a solution to the conflict in Cyprus (though not wholly the responsibility of Turkey); the long list of the Turkish government's anti-democratic measures; the transparent objection of major EU members to Turkey's acceptance; the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide (which recently led to a diplomatic crisis between Turkey and the Vatican); and the crisis within the Eurozone – all cast a giant shadow over Turkey's potential membership, at least if no major change takes place in the current structure of the EU. Last year's statement by EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, that there will be no further EU enlargement in the next five years, adds to the improbability of Turkey ever becoming a full member. The official statement of the EU Council in December 2014 that Turkey is a candidate state and a key EU partner does not change the reality of the current status of the relations. Moreover, it is doubtful whether Turkey under Erdogan is genuinely seeking membership, given the obligations it entails. His recent reaction to the official EU concern about steps taken by his government against opposition media organs – that the EU should keep its wisdom to itself – is telling. In the

past, part of the allure of the “Turkish model” in Arab public opinion was the fact that Turkey is an EU candidate state. Sans this element, Erdogan’s autocratic tendencies and worrying signs regarding the Turkish economy make the Turkish model much less enviable, and mark one more reason for the relative decline of Turkey’s regional influence.

