

# Aspiring to Be a Playmaker

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The Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean were at the centre of world affairs in 2006 for a variety of reasons. The ongoing violence in Iraq that morphed into a civil war after the bombing of the al-Askariya shrine, the continuing tension over Iran's nuclear ambitions and finally the Israeli-Hezbollah war in Lebanon that almost transformed the strategic balances of the region kept the world focused on its developments. The Lebanese tragedy brought forth the strategic outreach of Iran in the Eastern Mediterranean and the links between the politics of the Middle East and the Mediterranean in general.

The year also witnessed the rage over the re-publication of the unflattering cartoons of the prophet of the Muslims, Mohammed, in several European newspapers. The cultural divide between Europeans concerned with freedom of expression and the Muslims incensed by what they considered to be blasphemy against their prophet brought home the burning issues of integration and post-colonial sensitivities. It was no surprise though that the two countries that took the lead in bringing about a report on a "dialogue of civilizations" were Spain and Turkey, legatees of two great Empires representing two adversarial faiths that once dominated the Mediterranean.

The work and the efforts over "the dialogue of civilizations" was not the only engagement of Turkey in the Mediterranean. The country's long-standing involvement with the Cyprus imbroglio continued as the government tried to find ways of accommodating its obligations to the EU with the political needs of Turkish Cypriots and its own strategic interests. Beyond this perennial issue, Turkey's stance on the Lebanon war underscored the rising interest in Turkey's foreign policy for the Middle East and the importance the

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country attributes to the stability of the region. More importantly, Turkey's decision to send troops to the newly beefed up UNIFIL despite popular resistance demonstrated both the country's commitment to harmonize its foreign policy with its EU partners and its ambition to be counted in the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Given the fact that three of Turkey's neighbours were either in a state of war (Iraq) or in the eye of the storm (Iran and Syria), such concerns had a bearing on the stability of the region and arguably of the world. In the course of its efforts to play a central role in the region, Turkey also ran afoul of its allies' policies as in the case of the invitation of Hamas' radical leader Khaled Mashaal, who resides in Damascus, to Istanbul in the aftermath of the Palestinian elections that brought Hamas to power. Similarly, President Sezer's official visit to Damascus only a couple of months after the murder of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri of Lebanon caused a minor diplomatic row with the United States. Throughout the year, heads of state or government from the region visited Turkey. Arguably the two most important were the visits by Prime Minister Maliki of Iraq and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in the middle of the war between Israel and Hezbollah. The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mottaki also showed up in Ankara in August. Conspicuously absent from the list of visitors was President Talabani of Iraq. He was not invited by the Turkish President because he is a Kurd and President Sezer did not find it appropriate to meet with him even if foreign policy professionals and the government insisted that it was a necessary move.

## The Benighted Island

The Turkish government decided to make a fast move on the Cyprus issue when the year began. In 2005 the issue almost blocked the start of accession negotiations with the EU because of pending problems over the extension of the customs union to the Nicosia government. Turkey refuses to open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot vessels although it promised to do so in 2005. It wants the European Union to honour its commitments to the Turkish Cypriots who, although they voted in favour of the unification of the island, are being punished by the continuation of embargoes imposed on them by their once and future compatriots. The EU is unable or unwilling to break the grip of its member and plays along with the non-conciliatory policies of the Papadopoulos administration.

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The Turkish opening, a so-called action plan made up of ten items admittedly did not have any new proposals but it was mostly a gesture of good will reflecting the government's preference for a policy of being "one step ahead." The opening drew no positive responses from Greek Cypriots and the Union through the year failed to break Nicosia's veto on the direct trade directive. Some funds were finally allocated to the Turkish side. Ultimately the year ended with the issue of the ports still unresolved. Using the absence of any moves by Ankara on this issue the opponents of Turkey's accession raised the ante. The European Commission charged with reviewing whether Turkey fulfilled its commitments finally ended up recommending the suspension of eight chapters, presumably to avoid a total suspension. Thus the irresolution on the Cyprus issue harmed Turkey-EU relations and substantially diminished the Turkish public's enthusiasm for EU membership. More importantly perhaps, the Eastern Mediterranean

security situation did not ameliorate because Turkey continued to block Cyprus' participation in NATO exercises and tensions between Ankara and Nicosia remained alive even in latent form.

## The Visitor from the South

The American policy of democracy promotion took a considerable blow when the Palestinians, defying earlier polls, gave the militant organization Hamas a clear majority in the Parliament. The results, arguably surprising even the Hamas leadership, sent shock waves through Israel and the Western world. The United States positioned itself to isolate Hamas and force it to change its stance and behaviour. Immediately plans were drawn to ensure the failure of Hamas and its future government so long as it did not renounce violence, recognize Israel's right to exist and accept agreements signed earlier between the PLO and Israel. It thus came as a truly unpleasant shock to Washington that the exiled leader of Hamas, Khalid Meshaal, who resides in Damascus and was not even an elected deputy, was allowed to visit Turkey for meetings with Turkish officials. The visit organized by the ruling AKP's foreign policy cadres sidestepped the Foreign Ministry. Once the immensity of the reaction that the visit by what the West considered a terrorist organization would engender was understood, Ankara did change Meshaal's programme and the Prime Minister did not meet with his Palestinian guest. The explanation issued by the government suggested that the visit was meant to let Mr. Meshaal understand that he had to recognize Israel and that he should not visit Iran immediately.

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Furthermore, the government expressed the belief that it would be better to engage Hamas if the world community expected moderate behaviour from the organization. Not only did Mr. Meshaal go to Tehran upon returning from Ankara; the government's explanations did not satisfy either Israel or the United States. The American secretary of state Condoleeza

Rice was particularly incensed. The Israelis, who first reacted by asking how Turkey would feel if they met with representatives of the Kurdish terrorist organization PKK, ultimately decided to play the episode down but there was no doubt harm was done to the government's standing. Outwardly contrite, the government nonetheless remained unrepentant. Throughout the year, and particularly during the Israel-Hezbollah war of the summer, its good offices were sought to relate messages to Meshaal or his Syrian hosts and the government presented these as evidence that its policy of engagement was well advised and therefore accepted by his Western and Israeli partners.

### The Unravelling Neighbour

Atop the list of Turkey's foreign policy priorities was Iraq. In fact, in the wake of the start of accession negotiations with the EU, Prime Minister Erdogan declared that Iraq replaced the EU as the most important item on Turkey's foreign policy agenda. Three issues were of particular concern for Turkey: the territorial integrity of Iraq and the avoidance of a full-fledged civil war; the fate of the province of Kirkuk; and the elimination of the PKK, a Turkey-based Kurdish terrorist organisation that finds refuge and support in the Kurdistan Regional Government territory.

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To secure all three goals, Turkey chose to engage the central government in Baghdad and even invited outgoing Prime Minister Jafari to Ankara for consultations during the long crisis of government formation in the wake of the general elections. Later in the year Prime Minister Maliki visited Ankara with his ministers to discuss these matters. Reports indicated that Turkey could not bring the government in Baghdad to share its vision on either the PKK or the Kirkuk issues. This was no surprise since the Kurds hold important positions in the Iraqi government and the Turkish government refuses to engage the Kurdish authorities, including the Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, who is a

Kurd. On the issue of the ongoing sectarian strife that the Turks saw as a civil war, Turkey's efforts were like others': futile. Turkey welcomed the Iraq Study Group report that was published at the end of the year in Washington and appreciated its realistic assessment of the situation and its basic agreement with the Turkish approach that it would be wise to engage Iraq's neighbours, particularly Syria and Iran. In the spring, the PKK ended its self-imposed cease fire and began attacking Turkish troops. By July the pressure on the government and the military alike became unbearable as body bags kept coming from the southeast of the country. In July, as the Turkish troop concentrations increased significantly along the border with Iraq, the United States decided to make a move. Until then, Washington kept pressing the Turkish side not to make a military move so as not to alienate the Iraqi Kurds and turn the only stable part of Iraq into a battle zone. Using this excuse as well as its inability to allocate troops to fight the PKK, which it recognized as a terrorist organisation, Washington drew the ire of the Turkish public and was accused of being hypocritical. There is no doubt that the Iraqi Kurds used the PKK as leverage against Turkey and counted on the Americans to avoid a Turkish military operation. By September the United States and Turkey appointed two retired generals to coordinate efforts to fight the PKK. The American side preferred to make use of non-military means. To that end, the American side shared intelligence information with the Turks, helped cut the financial resources of the PKK in Europe and elsewhere and closed down its representative offices. Repeatedly, though, the American side told its Turkish interlocutors who invoked the right of self-defence to desist from a military operation, which so far the Turkish side has not undertaken. The Turkish demands for rendering some 150 PKK operatives residing in Iraq and the demand for operations against PKK camps went unheeded.

The matter of Kirkuk remained one that periodically raised tensions between Iraqi Kurds and Turkey. The Kurds' claim that Kirkuk belonged to them and their insistence on holding a referendum to determine the fate of the city, i.e. whether it would be part of the Kurdish region, prompted strong responses from Ankara. Although it is unlikely that Turkey would consider a *fait accompli* by Kurds in Kirkuk a *casus belli*, it made clear that the response would be considerably harsh. The President of the Kurdistan regional Government, Mr. Barzani, in his turn continued to defy Turkey, relying on American unwillingness to

pressure the Kurds. Yet by the end of the year, partially in connection with the Iraq Study Group Report the administration in Washington was also moving towards the idea of postponing the referendum that might bring about intervention by all Iraq's neighbours and the Shiite and Sunni Arabs of Iraq.

## Beyond Lebanon

On September 5, 2006, the Turkish Parliament voted 340 to 192, along strictly partisan lines, in favour of sending troops to Lebanon to join the UNIFIL contingent beefed up by UN Security Council

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Resolution 1701. The government defied overwhelming public opposition and risked alienating its own base by taking a distinctly unpopular position. The Israeli war against Hezbollah was widely disliked in Turkey and emotions there ran high against Israel and the US. In such an emotional atmosphere, when the time came to debate peacekeeping operations most of the

### A STANDOFF IN TURKEY'S EU MEMBERSHIP NEGOTIATION

2006 will not be remembered as a good year for the relations between Turkey and the European Union. Early in the year there were signs of potential difficulties looming on the horizon. Nonetheless, the various actors did not modify their postures, and thus were unable to reach agreement on a large number of issues. This situation saw its climax by the end of the year, when the EU Council decided to suspend accession talks with Turkey on a number of important areas.

In addition to this dispute, confrontation between the governments of Cyprus and Turkey remained the main obstacle. Other factors such as France, Germany and Austria's opposition to Turkish membership to the EU played a major role, along with the slow pace of reform implementation by the government in Ankara.

In early February the European Commission recommended the opening of detailed negotiations over issues of science and technology, the first of 35 chapters established to allow the accession of Turkey.

On 8th March the Turkey – EU negotiating team held a meeting in Vienna, the first one to be held since the official announcement of accession negotiations was made in October 2005. The postures that remained largely unchanged over the following months were defined in this meeting. The EU requires that Turkey comply with the customs protocol that envisages the opening of Turkish harbours and airports to the traffic of Greek-Cypriot vessels and aeroplanes in order to not jeopardize accession. For its part, Turkey claims that the EU is not keeping its commitment to put an end to the international isolation of Turkish Cypriots.

In the face of this situation, Olli Rehn, the European Commissioner in charge of enlargement warned about "turbulence" looming on the horizon and made an appeal for a major diplomatic effort in order to avoid "a train crash."

Difficulties emerged on June 12th, during the accession conference in which Cyprus repeatedly refused to conclude an agreement on the science and technology chapter. Cyprus was eventually persuaded to agree, with the issuing of a statement that reminds the Turkish government of its obligation to recognize the government of Nicosia and which also establishes that the conclusion of the negotiation on the chapter may be revised if deemed necessary.

In a report issued on 8th November, the European Commission warned that although Ankara continues to meet the Copenhagen Criteria, the

pace of reforms has slowed down. Yet the most critical issue is still Turkey's resistance to open its harbours and airports to Greek-Cypriot vessels and aeroplanes.

In view of this situation, the European Commission decided to recommend a suspension of accession talks in eight chapters: free movement of goods; freedom to establish and provide services; financial services; agriculture and rural development; fisheries; transport; customs union and external relations. All of these chapters are related to Turkey's refusal of Cyprus. It also proposes that no provisional closure of any of the chapters be agreed upon as long as Turkey does not meet the requirements under the customs protocol.

In an attempt to avoid a standoff in negotiations, Turkey announced to the EU its intention to open one of its harbours and one of its airports to the traffic of Greek-Cypriot vessels. The proposal was not considered sufficient by the Council of Ministers of the EU, which approved at its meeting of 12th December, the suspension of negotiations and asked the Commission to submit an annual report on the progress of Turkey's implementation of the commitments derived from the additional protocol of the Customs Union agreement.

### Reference Documents

European Commission, Turkey 2006, Progress Report:

[http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key\\_documents/2006/nov/tr\\_sec\\_1390\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2006/nov/tr_sec_1390_en.pdf)

The Commission presents its recommendation on the continuation of Turkey's accession negotiations:

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/06/1652>  
Press Release of Council Session # 2736, EU General Affairs and External Relations, Luxembourg 12th June 2006:  
[www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/es/gena/90324.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/es/gena/90324.pdf)

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Further information:

[http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/turkey/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/turkey/index_en.htm)

public saw in the possible deployment of Turkish troops an effort to protect Israel and do Washington's bidding. Before the government called for an extraordinary session of parliament to debate and vote on the matter, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul attended the Rome Summit and visited Lebanon, Israel and Syria to make sure that all the relevant parties would welcome Turkey's participation in a peacekeeping force once the Security Council passed the relevant resolution.

In the wake of the vote, the Financial Times reported that the result was "more than a signal (of) Ankara's determination to participate in what it considers an urgent humanitarian cause." Despite the fact that the Turkish contribution would be mostly limited to naval operations and that ground forces would only be deployed to protect Turkish Red Crescent personnel and other officials, for the newspaper's Ankara correspondent the decision highlighted Turkey's aspiration to be considered an important regional player. It enabled Turkey to serve on an equal footing with European Union countries.

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In his defence of the government's policy in parliament, Foreign Minister Gul intimated that broader strategic considerations guided government thinking. "In short," he stated, "the Lebanese crisis fully exposed Turkey's strategic position where East and West meet and

clearly highlighted the Mediterranean dimension of our identity... suffice it to mention the security of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline to underscore our ties to [the Eastern Mediterranean]."

Emphatically denying that Turkish troops would be used to disarm Hezbollah, Gul argued that, "this position is consistent with our status as a bridge between civilizations (...) and our claims that the European Union will become a global power with Turkey."

Therein lies the true significance of the Turkish decision. The Lebanon war can only be appreciated in the broader context of a regional balance of power, where it is related to the American-Iranian struggle to shape the region and define Iran's role in it. The strengthening of the Lebanese state is the stated goal of Resolution 1701 and the aim of the West. This will be a challenge to both Syria and Iran, particularly if the mission succeeds. Turkey, which enjoys cordial relations with both Tehran and Damascus and whose government as well as public are sympathetic toward Hezbollah, thus unequivocally took the side of its Western allies. This choice also reflected Turkey's newfound commonality of interests with the established Arab states. Concerned with the growing influence of Shiite Iran, the Sunni Arab states are determined to contain Tehran's hegemonic aspirations. This explains their criticism of Hezbollah and the effective, if undeclared, support for Israel's war that drew fire from their own publics. In these efforts to contain Iran, Turkey is considered an important ally. It is as part of this quest to forge alliances to balance Iran and to limit the effects of the Shiite ascendance that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia visited Turkey, the first visit of this kind in 40 years.