

## Political Risk in the Middle East: The Emergence of Turkey

William Leiss (19 September 2011)

In case you missed the important and perceptive article by Doug Saunders, in Saturday's *Globe and Mail* ("Why the West quietly cheers Turkey's Rise," 17 September 2011, A16: <http://tinyurl.com/3suew5d>), here is a short summary: Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was well-received during a visit last week to the capitals of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. This and other recent initiatives appears to mark a significant shift in Turkey's foreign-policy orientation, away from Europe and the prospect of EU membership and toward the Arab world, which of course remembers Constantinople as the capital of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled much of the Middle East and North Africa for four centuries, until it finally collapsed for good in 1922.

The provocative message that Erdogan was bringing to the newly-awakened political actors in these three countries was to adopt the Turkish model of a constitutional, secular state: "In Turkey, constitutional secularism is defined as the state remaining equidistant to all religions. In a secular regime people are free to be religious or not.... Do not fear secularism because it does not mean being an enemy of religion. I hope the new regime in Egypt will be secular." These remarks stunned the Islamic Brotherhood, of course, but there are many others in Egypt who were very encouraged by them. In a subsequent set of interviews, Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, proposed that Turkey and Egypt, representing the two most populous nations in the region, should proceed to form a strong economic and political alliance (Anthony Shadid, "Turkey Predicts Alliance with Egypt as Regional Anchors," *The New York Times*, 19 September 2011: <http://tinyurl.com/4yy8zrw>).

These new developments mark a dramatic turnaround in Turkey's earlier stances. It had long supported the al-Assad regime in Syria, seeking to make common cause with it on grounds of economic interests, until that regime ignored Turkey's pleas to end the killing of its citizens, and it had initially opposed the NATO intervention in Libya.

If Turkey succeeds in capitalizing on its new orientation to the Arab world, and also in influencing the spread of a "secularist" model of constitutional government in the new regimes in North Africa, this could mark a dramatic transformation in the region. For one thing, it could begin to offset the pernicious theocratic model that has long dominated the Arab world, in both its Sunni (Saudi Arabia) and Shia (Iran) versions. This theocratic model is highly destabilizing, both in its Iranian form, through its support of Hezbollah in Lebanon and of the offensive Syrian dictatorship, and in its Saudi Arabian form, which spawned and still sustains jihadist fundamentalism around the world.

The question as to whether a true democratic revolution would emerge from the unrest along the North African coast, or whether an alternative – a new set of radical Islamist regimes – would emerge, has been up in the air for some time. The Turkish initiatives

represent a new element in the mix, and if they succeed they could transform the nature of politics in the Middle East and the level of global political risk that exists in that region. For in the existing configuration, the level of risk can only increase, as Iran plays with its nuclear enrichment program and other nations in the region, notably Saudi Arabia, muse about the need to acquire nuclear capabilities for themselves.

These events in North Africa are occurring at the same time as the equally dramatic changes with respect to Turkey's role in the conflict over Israel and Palestine. Israel has lost one of its longstanding regional allies, as a result of its refusal to apologize for the killing of eight Turkish civilians in last year's episode involving a boat bound for Gaza. Turkey has now made a strong appeal to the Arab world to support Palestine's bid for statehood at the United Nations. As a columnist for *The Economist* noted recently ("Palestine statehood: A strategic mistake by everyone," 14 September 2001: <http://tinyurl.com/6hrxbty>), foreign supporters of Israel should recognize that allowing the Palestinians to proceed concretely towards statehood through "observer" status at the United Nations is in Israel's long-term interests. There is really no alternative if the present logjam is to be broken: How long does Israel think it can go on pretending that it is willing to engage in serious bilateral negotiations, while it uses every pause in the process to plant new settlements in the contested territorial zones?

The refusal by Israel and the United States to alter their stance in this matter could be very costly in the long run. Israel is now seeing its few remaining allies in the Middle East (most importantly, Egypt and Turkey) turn in a fundamentally new direction. So it now relies almost exclusively on the fact that it can hold hostage the national politics in the United States, its friends having recently sent President Obama a pointed reminder on that score in a recent election in New York that cost Democrats another seat in the House. But the world is changeable, even in respect to the hold that a highly theocratic government in Israel has over U. S. politics, and some day Israel may come to realize, to its sorrow, that deciding to be friendless in the entire region of the globe where you happen to live was a remarkably poor choice.