

“Turkish Hindsight: Muslim Roots, Secular Minds” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (Winter/Spring 2008) 127-131 [reprinted by permission.]

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Graham Fuller. *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*, Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace Press, 2007. \$14.95.

After eight decades of self-imposed exile to the periphery of Islamic affairs, Turkey is again emerging as a potential major factor in the development of the Muslim world. The United States Institute of Peace has picked the perfect moment to publish this succinct and insightful review of its current position, how it got there, where it may go next, and what the United States can do about it. Graham Fuller is an analyst of scholarly temperament and sound perception who has thoughtfully assembled and organized the essential information that scholars, policymakers, and pundits in any way concerned with the Muslim world need to know about Turkey at this moment in history. The typescript sent me for review was not in final form, so the cited page numbers may differ from the published text, but the scarcity of errors in the in-progress work indicates that the final copy will be a top quality publication.

After a short introduction concisely stating the objectives of the work, the book is in three parts titled with the “Turkey’s Historical Trajectory,” “Turkey’s Relations with the Muslim World,” and “Turkey’s Future Trajectory.” The first and last of these cover what the titles indicate, while the second also deals with Turkey’s relations with Israel, Eurasia, Europe and the United States, as well as the Muslim world.

Fuller’s overarching theme is that Turkey’s self-identification as a European state is a phase, and that both Turkey’s roots in the Middle East and the nature of recent historical events are pushing for a reconsideration of Turkey’s place in the world. Turkey’s identity is complex, for it’s history is rich—richer than Turkish elites care to admit—and its interests are wide reaching.

Naturally, Fuller gives appropriate emphasis on the Ottoman predecessor of the Turkish republic and on Kemal Ataturk’s revolutionary impact on Turkish society with his forcible establishment of a secular republic. Fuller masterfully navigates the problematic nuances of an authoritarian democracy. He draws on the important dualities of the Turkish experience—a democratic republic with military oversight; an enforced secularity imposed on a Muslim society colored by a deep spirituality; and a pragmatic cooperative relationship with Israel from a state with popular sympathy for the Palestinians—to explain how the complex relations of Turkey today with the rest of the world emerged.

Among Fuller’s recurrent themes is how American policymakers have misread Turkey. The expectations that it would “be a natural partner and source of support in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), back U.S. military operations in the region, and ... continue to

be an enduring symbol of anti-Islamist ideology ... did not materialize as Washington had hoped.”¹ A careful reading of Fuller’s text will reward the reader with an understanding of why and with a better sense of avoiding such errors in the future.

Fuller’s analysis of the historical trajectory takes six chapters: “The Historical Lens,” “The Ottoman Era,” “The Kemalist Experience,” “The Cold War Interlude,” and “New Openings to the Muslim World,” and “The Reemergence of Turkish Islam.” Fuller traces how the late Ottoman attraction to the West’s strengths and dissatisfaction with Muslim (especially Arab) shortcomings motivated “a conscious effort to synthesize Islamic ideas with those of the Western enlightenment.”² Fuller argues that the vision was a pan-Islamic one, and that before 1914, whatever differences the Turks had with the Arabs, they were not nationalistic in character.

For Fuller it was not a romanticized “Arab revolt,” but Kemalism that split Turkey from the Arab and broader Muslim world. He writes that the abolition of the caliphate because it was perceived as an obstacle to Turkish nationalism was “roughly akin to a snap decision by an Italian prime minister to abolish the papacy without consultation with the worldwide Catholic community.”³ The extreme steps in the rejection of Islam, such as the replacement of the Arabic script with Latin characters and the purging of words of Arab or Persian origin from the language has had a devastating effect on Turkish self-perception, to the degree that Turks cannot use their own Ottoman historical archives, but must rely on Western sources for an understanding of their Ottoman past. Islam being the main connection between the Turks and the Arabs, its removal from public life has split the two groups in an unprecedented manner.

The rise of the Soviet Union as a threat to Turkish (and Iranian) territorial integrity under Stalin precipitated an abandonment of Kemalist neutrality and moved Turkey into alignment with the Western powers. Fuller amply demonstrates that Turkey’s enthusiasm in support of Western positions was sometimes so extreme as to be embarrassing. When communists seemed to be in a position to seize power in Damascus in 1957, “Turkey threatened to unilaterally invade the country” and the U.S and U.K. had to caution it against doing so.⁴ “In 1985, Turkey unsuccessfully called for Western military intervention in Iraq to restore the monarchy after its overthrow.”⁵

In the 1960s it was Turkey’s turn to be embarrassed by American insensitivity to its interests, exemplified by the Cuban missile crisis and Cypress policy.⁶ Additionally, the refugee problem caused by the establishment of Israel and the humiliation of the Arab states by its subsequent military successes prompted the evolution of the countries on Turkey’s borders “into ‘security states’ ruled by authoritarian—often military—regimes” and many Arab leaders were turning towards the Soviet Union,⁷ giving rise to a reconsideration of Turkey’s “single-minded strategic commitment to the United States.”⁸ Turkey returned to its Kemalist neutrality, not taking sides in the Iran-Iraq war.

Fuller appropriately lays great stress on the important of Turgut Özal’s role in turning economic policy into “a driving force in Turkish foreign policy.”⁹ Özal temporarily broke with the neutrality policy to side with the U.S. in the 1991 Iraq War, but the experience

was costly for Turkey in a variety of ways, including the problems engendered by the flow of Kurdish refugees. Turks became yet more wary of the wisdom of supporting U.S. regional policies,¹⁰ and the stage was set for Necmitten Erbakan to succeed in the establishment of a successful Islamic political party for the first time in the republic's history. Although Erbakan's party was eventually deprived of power by the military, it paved the way for the more spectacular success of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) and the "largely apolitical communitarian movement of Fethullah Gülen." "The increasing democratization of Turkey has caused the radical French style secularism of the elites to give way to more moderate, American style secularism, "defined as 'the state's *impartiality* towards every form of religious belief and philosophical conviction' and that the state, rather than the individual is restricted by this."¹²

As a result, three groups found themselves empowered: "a new and growing Anatolian business class, traditional lower classes in the cities, and a new and growing Islamic professional and intellectual class that, while modern, still finds meaningful identity in Muslim tradition."¹³ Fuller quotes the Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gül's assertion that "At the time that people are talking about a clash of civilizations, Turkey is a natural bridge of civilizations."¹⁴ It is the moderates who stand to benefit the most from the liberalization of Turkish society.

Fuller is inclined to accept the claim of Gülen's movement that its purpose is societal reform, not, as its radical secular critics claim, political power to impose their vision of Islamic law on the rest of Turkish society. He notes that "[o]ne of the Gülen movement's greatest accomplishments—and a demonstration of its search for greater universalism—has come through a remarkable process of intellectual outreach, a series of roundtables called the Abant Forum" which has brought together "Muslims, secularists, traditionalists, modernists, atheists, Christians, leftists, and conservatives—to hammer out common positions....,"¹⁵ for example that an opposition to state dictation of clothing codes that either mandate or ban any form of religious dress or expression.

The second part of the book is covered in ten chapters dealing with Turkey's current relations with various parts of worlds. In the chapter on "JDP Policies Toward the Muslim World," Fuller argues that "Turkey has moved away from viewing Iraqi events entirely through a Kurdish prism and has developed ties" with various groups, Sunni and Shi'a.¹⁶ Talks held with Syria allow Turkey to speak frankly about needed reforms there in ways that the American administration can't because of its intransigence. Turkey has demonstrated its independence from the U.S. with regard to Iran even more strongly, as when "the staunchly secular President [Ahmet Necdet] Sezer visited Iran" in the wake of President Bush's "axis of evil" speech.¹⁷ The JDP has maintained "close working ties with Israel"¹⁸ even as it demonstrates "greater involvement in the Palestinian problem"¹⁹ and spoke out forcefully "against Israel's excessive use of force" in the 2006 invasion of Lebanon.²⁰ Turkey's warming towards the Organization of Islamic Conference reached a climax when "Turkey actually assumed the chairmanship of the OIC" in 2004.²¹

In the eighth chapter Fuller examines what are "The Foundations of Turkey's Regional Influence." He considers the roles of military modernization, peacekeeping efforts,

economic, financial and labor factors, energy and water policies, as well as the Kurdish problem and pan-Turkism in pulling Turkey back into a closer relationship with the the Middle East..

Chapter 9 deals with “Turkey and Syria” and the implications for Israel. Chapter 10 on “Turkey and Iraq” gives special attention to border issues like Mosul, Kirkuk and the Turkmen, and the various wars. As a result of the current war, Fuller states, most “Turkish circles across the ideological and political spectrum ... now believe that the United States has become a typical imperial power marching in the footsteps of past European imperialism ... “ and that a Kurdish state is about to be created that will destabilize the region become the same kind of “source of discord, conflict, and struggle” as has Israel.²²

In Chapter 11, Fuller points out that the relationship between “Turkey and Iran” has been long and complex and without significant Sunni-Shia hostility. While the Kurdish problem and issues regarding Turkic speakers in Iran are points of friction, the two nations have been remarkably successful at maintaining their cordiality. “Foreign Minister Gül has made efforts to maintain regular ties with Tehran, but he has also offered some friendly criticism; he has publicly stated that all countries must open themselves up to internal criticism and self-examination...”²³ Although Turkey is deeply concerned about the prospect of nuclear weapons in Iran, “it also fears that U.S. policies will only push Iran to move more rapidly and dangerously in the nuclear direction.”²⁴

Chapter 12 on “Turkey and Israel” makes intelligible Turkey’s working relationship with the Jewish state. Chapter 13 on “Turkey and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Afghanistan” explores the varied strategic, political and economic factors that determine those relationships. Chapter 14 on “Turkey and Eurasia” does the same for the relationships with the Russian and Central Asian republics and other parts of Asia. Among the insights are the increasing levels of trade with various partners, that Russia is an important source of energy and can complement the West as a source of military hardware,²⁵ that “pan-Turkic identities may grow stronger with democratization,”²⁶ that Prime Minister “Erdogan has wisely sought to turn the highly contentious issue of past Ottoman massacres of Armenians over to an international scholarly panel for resolution rather than to leave it to politicians to pass historical judgment.”²⁷ Chapter 15 on “Turkey and Europe” focuses on the integration of Turks into the European nations.

Chapter 16 on “Turkey and the United States” starts by explaining the close relationship between these two countries in the five decades of the Cold War, in which the U.S. “facilitated Turkey’s entry into the Western alliance ... securing its position as a ‘Western’ state and beneficiary of Western largesse.”²⁸ The strength of this closeness had perverse effects on Turkish-Arab relations. Yet, despite this closeness, Fuller notes a string of American blunders. Thanks to American support of oppressive Arab regimes and Israeli policies, “the Arab world demonstrated consistent support for Christian Greece over Muslim Turkey on the vital Cyprus conflict...”²⁹ Other examples include American pressure in 1972 “to ban all poppy production in Turkey—an entirely legal and supervised process for Turkey’s significant pharmaceutical industry,”³⁰ the Kurdish refugee problem from the first Gulf War, and the U.S. Congress’s repeated attempts to

make political hay out of the Armenian massacres. To add insult to injury, the domestic efforts of neoconservatives to paint religious Turks as a threat to the West flies in the face of the fact that polls show that supporters of the JDP have “consistently held more moderate views toward the United States did supporters of two other major Turkish parties....”³¹

The future trajectory is covered in two chapters, “Turkey’s Future Foreign Policy Scenarios,” and the conclusion, “*What Can Washington Do?*” The bottom line is that Turkey will choose from among three options: a Washington-centric policy, a Euro-centric policy, or a Turko-centric policy. Any self-respecting nation will seek to put its own interests at the center. Fuller argues that such a course could also serve the long-term interests of the United States as well if the United States would just make certain key policy changes, such as opening dialogs with Turkey’s neighbors Syrian and Iran and making meaningful positive efforts to settle the Palestinian-Israeli dispute.³² I believe that Fuller’s analysis accurate and constructive and that American policymakers will do well to take it into account.

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Notes.

¹ P. 7.

² P. 20.

³ P. 26.

⁴ P. 35.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ p. 36.

⁸ P. 37.

⁹ P. 40.

¹⁰ P. 41.

¹¹ P. 49.

¹² P. 50.

¹³ P. 49.

¹⁴ P. 51.

¹⁵ P. 63.

¹⁶ P. 71.

¹⁷ P. 73.

¹⁸ P. 76.

¹⁹ P. 75.

²⁰ P. 77.

²¹ P. 78.

²² P. 102.

²³ P. 110.

²⁴ P. 111.

²⁵ P. 129.

²⁶ P. 132.

²⁷ 135.

²⁸ P. 147.

²⁹ P. 148.

³⁰ P. 149.

³¹ P. 152.

³² P. 171.