

## **Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War**

*Philip Robins*

*Seattle: Washington University Press, 2003. 352 pages.*

Philip Robins contends that Turkish foreign policy has faced four challenges in four distinct periods of its history: (1) consolidating the emergent Turkish Republic through external recognition (1930s), (2) remaining neutral during the Second World War (1940s), (3) confronting the challenge of Soviet expansionism (the cold war era), and (4) responding to the end of bipolarity (post-cold war era). Robins examines these foreign policy issues in the last period.

The main thesis of this work is threefold: First, Turkey is a status quo power in the way that its foreign policy elites have fastened their thinking and practice to the framework of “the sanctity of borders, of states, of multilateral institutions and of norms of conduct, even when it became clear that systemic changes had rendered some of these continuities no longer tenable” (p. 6). Second, Turkey continues to be firmly oriented westwards in terms of its foreign relations, which are characterized by its strong commitment to NATO as well as its desire to join the European Union (EU). Finally, Turkish foreign policy has been characterized more by “caution than daring,” quoting Malik Mufti. Despite the increase in its power relative to its neighbors, Turkey has avoided an interventionist foreign policy by emphasizing the formation of multilateral frameworks for conflict resolution.

Robins defends these arguments by analyzing the international systemic and domestic politics context in which Turkish foreign policy is

shaped. Here he also lays out his theoretical framework, which holds that foreign policy decisions emerge through an interplay of international and domestic factors. International systemic changes include the end of the cold war and, regionally, the Gulf crisis of 1991. One might expect, based on an international systemic analysis, that Turkish foreign policy would change as a response to changes in the international system's distribution of power. For example, the disappearance of the Soviet threat, which compelled Turkey to enter into an alliance with the United States and Western Europe in the framework of NATO, could lead to a more independent Turkish foreign policy, as predicted by the realist school of international relations.

However, as Robins finds out, Turkish foreign policy did not respond adequately to opportunities offered by systemic structural changes and regional developments. While the Gulf war crisis was perceived internationally as the first post-cold war era test for the global community's efficient conflict resolution procedures, Turkey regarded and acted toward it from its state-centric geo-strategic perspective. As a result, it was "a missed opportunity to bind Turkey into a new normatively-based solidarity among allies that had been brought together in a Cold War context" (p. 19).

The author's thesis is that the reasons for this inability to adapt to change in the international system must be searched for domestically, particularly in the way Turkish security discourse is shaped. In the second part of the book, the author searches for material as well as ideational factors that informed Turkish foreign policy between 1985 and 2000. Here, he highlights experiences of the Turkish security establishment in the 1920s as continuously feeding what is referred to as "Sevrés complex," or the resounding fear that the country faces national disintegration from external powers and their internal collaborators. He offers interesting observations on "Turkey's strategic culture," but occasionally generalizes the Kemalist culture of insecurity as a general property of the entire Turkish nation.

Although Robins discusses different ideological groups and their foreign policy orientations, he occasionally fails to acknowledge how other groups have been able to transcend these fears. Also, his account of Kemalist foreign policy orientation appears to be superficial. For instance, the author describes the Kemalist foreign policy goals as "the best examples of the ideologically driven nature of Kemalist foreign policy was in its *Westpolitik*, embracing as it has done a variety of different issues from Turkey's membership of NATO and its relationship with the United States, to its attempts to become a member of the EU and the WEU" (p. 139).

According to the author, it is rather the non-Kemalist politicians who were responsible for “forever damaging the pursuit of the strategic Kemalist goal of EU membership” (p. 141). Any observer of Turkish politics would acknowledge the stiff resistance to Turkey’s EU membership mounted by the Kemalist political as well as intellectual establishment, a resistance that is deeply rooted in their culture of insecurity shaped by historical memory. The EU membership issue has reshuffled the positions of various actors in Turkey, including the Islamists. Thus, the book appears to be in serious need of updating so that it can tackle the question of why traditionally western-oriented Kemalist bureaucrats and intellectuals started opposing EU membership, an opposition that is both paradoxical and understandable, given the Kemalist perceptions of security threats informed by historical memory, as is the case with the Treaty of Sevres. The author also has to examine why the Islamists, who are presumed to have an anti-western ideological orientation, have been enthusiastically defending EU membership. Robins’ work does not include the period of the AKP government’s formation, although this transformation was observable much earlier.

The last part of the book is devoted to an in-depth study of four cases: Turkish-Israeli relations, the Turkic republics, northern Iraq, and Bosnia. As far as Turkish-Israeli relations are concerned, the underlying theme in Robins’ discussion again is continuity in Turkish strategic thinking. He describes Turkey and Israel as “embattled allies in the new Middle East.” However, since the “soft” military intervention into politics in 1997, the alliance has lost much of its profundity as a result of Turkey’s improved relations with Syria. The strategic thinking of the Turkish political elites appears to have been passing through a process of revision since 1997, particularly in the context of the Iraqi crisis. While the relationship between Turkey and Israel remains significant, it is based less on regional than on global power requisites.

Students of Turkish foreign policy will certainly find Robins’ book quite helpful for a review of an important part of recent Turkish history. However, they will also notice that, in contrast to the author’s prediction of continuity, Turkish foreign policy is perhaps more dynamic in responding to many recent changes in its strategic environment.

Hasan Kösebalaban  
Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science  
University of Utah  
Salt Lake City, Utah