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Book Review

TURKEY IN THE NEW CENTURY

by **İsmail Cem**

Expanded 2nd ed., Nicosia, TRNC: Rustem, 2001, 228pp.

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Serving foreign ministers do not often publish books explaining the concepts that underlie their conduct of the business of diplomacy. Diplomacy deals with concrete problems as they arise, often unexpectedly, day by day. To succeed, it has to be both practical and flexible. Foreign ministers are loath, therefore, to give hostages to fortune by committing to paper principles which they may have to accommodate later to changed circumstances. The danger of proclaiming high-sounding principles is illustrated by the sorry fate of the concept of an 'ethical foreign policy', which has drawn amused, and at times cynical, comment in Britain recently.

Foreign Minister İsmail Cem has fortunately decided to brave this danger. His decision is fortunate because the authors of Turkish foreign policy have until now been largely silent and left it to others, usually foreign academics, to describe and analyse their objectives. Several studies of Turkish diplomacy have been published recently.¹ It was time that it explained itself. This has now been done by Foreign Minister İsmail Cem who has thus put into practice his conviction that Turkish foreign policy should be pro-active and not reactive. In other words, it should not wait to correct misconceptions, but should itself state its governing concepts.

These concepts are set out in the introductory essay entitled 'A Different Approach to Foreign Policy', which the Minister wrote specially for the second edition of his book. The Minister argues that the traditional, established policy of the Turkish Republic disregarded the country's Ottoman past and cut itself off from its geographical surroundings. "The first clear break with the 'traditional' took place in 1974 when Bülent Ecevit [prime minister then as now, and leader of İsmail Cem's political party] did the inconceivable and came to the rescue of the Turkish community in Cyprus", İsmail Cem writes, adding: "His decision to do so was of the utmost importance. After years of passivity, Turkey for the first time courageously rose above the position and role that had been assigned to her" (p. 4).

Then, the late Turgut Özal, as prime minister and president, "led the way in bringing the newly liberated Turkic states of Central Asia and the Caucasus onto Turkey's political and economic agenda." Third, Süleyman Demirel, who also served as prime minister and then president, "vigorously cultivated the friendship of both the newly forming countries in the region and of those

which were regaining their independence” (p. 4).

These changes antedated İsmail Cem’s assumption of the office of foreign minister. His own particular contribution, he believes, was to add a historical and cultural dimension to Turkish foreign policy. Basing himself on the experience of the multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, multi-cultural and multi-continental Ottoman empire, İsmail Cem argues that such dichotomies as Islamist/ secular, European/Asian and Western/Eastern are not valid for Turkey. Thus, “Turkey is already European and has been [so] for seven centuries. She is European, as well as being Asian: this is her privilege and her asset.” Turkey does not need to convince others to accept its Europeanness. “Turkey’s European dimension does not require credentials: it is a historical, geographical and cultural fact” (p. 22).

Nevertheless, “we must acknowledge that European public opinion does not yet perceive Turkey as a genuine element of European unity. We must ourselves make a greater effort if this is not to remain the case; but Western Europe needs to change as well” (p. 40). In the meantime, for İsmail Cem, membership of the European Union is “a goal but not an obsession” (p. 24).

One difficulty in reaching this goal is to convince the European Union of Turkey’s democratic credentials. “No democracy is perfect and there are certain aspects of Turkey’s democracy that I personally criticize”, İsmail Cem writes. But he points out rightly that shortcomings were ignored when Turkey was a Western outpost in the Cold War. The end of the Cold War faced Turkey with the daunting task of reforming government practices and institutions, which the Cold War had influenced. However, Turkey now had the opportunity to set things right (p. 35).

Problems do not come singly. “Turkey’s procrastination in making much-needed economic and administrative reforms resulted in a severe financial crisis in early 2001,” İsmail Cem writes. But while this was a blow to short-term expectations, he believes that the country’s strong industrial infrastructure provides hope for an overall recovery. The economy is big and extremely dynamic. What it needs is to produce more of its technology, to rationalise, increase its productivity and distribute its benefits more fairly (pp. 37-8). Present difficulties should not, however, overshadow what has been achieved. One such achievement is that Turkey is by now not so much a bridge or a transit corridor, as a destination (p. 42). It is a market in its own right. This is as true of natural gas and other hydrocarbons, as it is of industrial goods.

Some of the ideas broached in the introductory essay are worked out in more detail in subsequent sections. Thus, speaking of Cyprus, Foreign Minister İsmail Cem says that decisiveness and self-confidence enabled Turkey to abandon the federation model, which worked against Turkish interests, and allowed it to propose a new, and much bolder, idea of confederation (p. 46). A successful confederation, as in the case of Switzerland, can, with time, produce a greater sense of unity than a federation that is accepted unwillingly. This illustrates the excellent principle set out by İsmail Cem in 1996: that a solution to the Cyprus problem should be carefully planned and applied in phases. After the completion of each phase, a thorough evaluation must be made before deciding to proceed to the next phase. “The process should be gradual and prudent” (p. 148). The danger inherent in the current approach of the European Union to the Cyprus problem is precisely that by dealing precipitately with the membership application of the Greek Cypriot authorities it disregards the fact that reconciliation is a gradual process. Fifty-six years after the end of World War II, the Poles are worried that membership of the European Union will allow Germans to buy land in their

country, from which they had been expelled. Is it prudent, therefore, to propose that Greek Cypriots should be granted the right of settlement in Northern Cyprus less than thirty years after the de facto partition of the island as a result of the fighting in 1974? Undue haste in admitting a divided Cyprus to the European Union would surely endanger the rapprochement between Greece and Turkey, from which, as İsmail Cem says, both countries have already benefited (p. 181).

The author can be remarkably forthright for a foreign minister. "I totally disagree with US policies on Cyprus," he says in an interview he gave in June 1999 (p. 73). Perceptions, priorities and interests differ also in the case of Iraq, where "the priority of the United States government is to topple the present regime, whatever the costs. Our priority, on the other hand, is to protect the territorial, national and political integrity of Iraq." Nevertheless, he noted in the same interview, Turkish-American relations were "progressing on solid ground" (p. 73). İsmail Cem describes the United States "not as a 'superpower', but a 'super-generator' of knowledge and information." On this basis, he believes, US leadership will continue in the new century (p. 72).

Statements by foreign ministers on current problems can date and become matters only of historical interest when a given problem is resolved or recedes. This is the case, for example, with the crisis over the deployment of SS-300 Russian missiles in Southern Cyprus, which Turkey thwarted. On the other hand, nothing could be more topical or prescient than İsmail Cem's repeated warnings against the danger of terrorism, warnings that are gathered in a separate section of the book published, it should be noted, before 11 September 2001. The Turkish Foreign Minister's stand is clear: no social or political demand or the presumed lack of certain freedoms can justify the murder of thousands. "Terror cannot be justified under any circumstances" (p. 124). In March 1999, two and a half years before President George W. Bush issued his warning to countries which support terrorism, İsmail Cem declared: "I want to make it clear: Turkey is not a friend, she will not be a friend of those who are the friends of a terror organisation" (p. 126).

Speaking of the PKK, the main terrorist organisation active in Turkey in the 1990's, İsmail Cem makes his position clear on the wider political context. In an interview published in Athens in March 2000, he said: "I am against politics based on religion and race." Such politics, he went on to say, were a disgrace for human history, and the fact that they still found support was a disgrace for our times (p. 117).

The previous year, the Turkish Foreign Minister told the General Assembly of the United Nations "We must overcome ethnic and religious divisions that stand in the way of human progress. The wellbeing of men and women, their right to a dignified life and the security and prosperity of nations must take precedence over all [other] priorities" (p. 102).

The collection of İsmail Cem's statements and speeches displays a consistent, essentially social-democratic, humanist vision. However vision is not enough. İsmail Cem has served longer as foreign minister than any of his immediate predecessors because of his ability to survive successive political and diplomatic challenges. But other challenges await him: a foreign minister's task is never done.

Finally, it is a pity that this articulate and authoritative explanation of Turkish foreign policy should not have benefited from better copy-editing. İsmail Cem asks for the readers' indulgence for infelicities in the English text. Nevertheless, a professional writer, such as İsmail Cem was before he entered politics, deserves a professional copy editor for a book addressed to other professionals

—diplomats, academics and journalists. This deficiency could easily be put right in a new edition taking in more recent speeches.

1 See, for example, William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy 1774-2000*, London: Frank Cass, 2000; Barry Rubin & Kemal Kirişçi (eds.), *Turkey in World Politics: an Emerging Multi-regional Power*, Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2001; Erik Cornell, *Turkey in the Twenty-first Century*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001; Alan Makovsky & Sabri Sayarı (eds.), *Turkey's New World: Changing Dynamics in Turkish Foreign Policy*, Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, 2000; Baskın Oran (ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası, Vol. I: 1918-1980*, Istanbul: İletişim, 2001.

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