
TURKEY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

OIL, ISLAM, AND POLITICS

ALON LIEL

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TRANSLATED BY EMANUEL LOTTEM



BOULDER
LONDON

Published in the United States of America in 2001 by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
1800 30th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301
www.rienner.com

and in the United Kingdom by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8LU

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Liel, Alon.

[Turkiyah ba-Mizrah ha-Tikhon. English]

Turkey in the Middle East : oil, Islam, and politics / Alon Liel ; translated by
Emanuel Lottem.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-55587-909-8

1. Turkey—Foreign economic relations—Middle East. 2. Middle East—Foreign
economic relations—Turkey. 3. Petroleum industry and trade—Government
policy—Turkey. 4. Turkey—Foreign relations—Middle East. 5. Middle East—Foreign
relations—Turkey. 6. Islam and politics—Turkey. I. Title.

HF1583.4.Z4 M628513 2001

327.561056—dc21

2001019006

British Cataloguing in Publication Data

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the requirements
of the American National Standard for Permanence of
Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

5 4 3 2 1

TURKEY IN
THE MIDDLE EAST

Published under the auspices of the
Harry S.Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace,
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Preface

This book is the product of my more than twenty years of research on Turkish and regional affairs, both as a member of the Israeli diplomatic service and as an academic scholar.

During the three decades with which the book is mainly concerned, 1970–2000, an extraordinary transformation took place in Turkey's Middle Eastern policies. For example, Turkey's relations with Israel, nearly meaningless in the 1970s, became intensely cooperative in the 1990s. This transformation reflected the renewed Western orientation of Turkey's foreign policy, which in turn was mainly the result of the country's recovery from the severe economic crisis of the late 1970s, following the global energy crisis. This story will be told here in some detail.

I acknowledge with thanks the support provided by the Rothschild and Yad HaNadiv Foundations, the Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and the Department of International Relations at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, my academic home these past few years. Special thanks to Amnon Cohen, Victor Azarya, and Edy Kaufman, members of the Truman Institute, whose help made possible the publication of the English-language version of the book.

I also express my thanks to those Turkish diplomats and politicians who consented to be interviewed for this study, including former Turkish prime minister and president Süleyman Demirel. Many thanks to members of Israel's diplomatic staff in Turkey, including Ambassadors Zvi Alpeleg and Uri Barner. To Turkey's previous ambassador to Israel, Barlas Özener, I am grateful for many conversations into the wee hours on Turkey and its marvels.

Finally, I wish to thank HaKibbutz HaMeuhad Publishing House, the translator and editor, Emanuel Lottem, and Lynne Rienner, who initiated publication in the United States.

Before this version of this book went to print, I lost my (and the translator's) friend Aryeh Dvir, a member of the Israeli Foreign Ministry and a hero of the Six Day War, who made many helpful comments on the first version of the book. May he rest in peace.

—*Alon Liel*

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INTRODUCTION: BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

The Anatolia plateau, the heartland of the Republic of Turkey, has for millennia been home to numerous tribes, peoples, and empires—a variegated patchwork of cultures and religions. Anatolia's geopolitical position between East and West has played a major role in shaping its inhabitants' systems of government and views of the world around them.

The Kemalist revolution that so radically transformed Turkey in the 1920s from an Islamic empire into a secular republic led Turkey toward the modern West culturally, economically, and politically. But as Turkey was becoming a secular state, its population never shrugged off its religious beliefs and heritage. After the death of revolutionary leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1938, the Turks showed a marked determination to preserve their Islamic identity and develop good relations with neighboring Muslim nations while retaining the heritage of their revered leader. This inclination fit well, particularly during the 1970s, with Turkey's economic exigencies and its desire not to become overly dependent on the West.

Turkey had become interested in having good relations with its Arab neighbors in the 1920s and 1930s, at a time when most Arab countries were still under foreign rule; since then, Turks have followed closely those countries' struggle for independence. First contacts were made in the 1930s with Egypt and particularly with Iraq, a highly important neighbor. Republican Turkey took pains to disavow any terri-

torial claims, especially to the Mosul area, which became part of Iraq after World War I. Turkey and Iraq even joined the Sa'adabad Treaty in July 1937, alongside Iran and Afghanistan. That same year Turkey launched Radio Ankara's Arabic-language broadcasts to inform the Arab world of its views. Turkey's leader, İsmet İnönü, used the inaugural occasion to send a message of friendship to the Arab nations.

Still, Turkey's relations with the Arab world could not be easily cleared of residue from the Ottoman period, most notoriously during its last few years. The Arabs could not forget the harsh oppression of the nascent Arab national movements, and the Turks did not readily forget how the Arabs had betrayed them during World War I. The Kemalist reforms of the 1920s and 1930s made the establishment of normal relations with the Arab countries all the more difficult since their underlying themes, Westernization and modernization, were anathema to the Arabs.

Immediately after World War II, when most Arab countries gained independence, conditions became more favorable for a Turkish-Arab rapprochement, but only superficially so. In effect, no close relationships developed except with Iraq, and that for only a short time. The period 1945–1965 was marked by tensions in Turkey's relations with most Arab countries, notably Egypt and Syria. One of the reasons for such tension was Turkey's wholehearted association with the West, especially the United States, at the time. In 1947 Turkey supported the Truman Doctrine; in July 1948 it was included in the Marshall Plan (to the tune of \$3 billion); it fought with the West in the Korean War; and, most ominously, it joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in February 1952, allowing a massive presence of U.S. troops on its territory.

The chief bone of contention between Turkey and most Arab states was its support during the 1950s of U.S. efforts to create a series of regional defense treaties aimed against the Soviet Union. A few Arab capitals believed the Baghdad Treaty—formed in 1955 by Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan—served as a vehicle for a Turkish regional leadership position, a feeling that exacerbated existing tensions. In the Arab world in the 1950s a nationalist bloc was created, led by Egypt and Syria, that tended to support the Soviet position in the international arena and to oppose Turkey's regional ambitions. At the same time, since 1949 Turkey had been developing relations with Israel, which also raised little enthusiasm among the Arabs.

The year 1958 marked an ebb in Turkey's relations with the Arab

nations. It was a stormy year in the Middle East: an anti-West coup took place in Iraq, Nasserism was strengthening with the establishment of the United Arab Republic, and civil war broke out in Lebanon. Turkey's decision to allow U.S. troop movements through its territory on their way to Lebanon as part of Western intervention in the civil war there strengthened Ankara's image as the West's only reliable ally in the Muslim Middle East. At the same time, however, Arabs regarded it as an anti-Arab move. All in all, except for Ankara's relations with Baghdad in the period 1955–1958, there were ongoing tensions in Turkey's relations with the Arab world during the 1950s.

The chill continued into the 1960s, but then a transformation took place. Particularly important among the reasons for this change were the general relaxation of interbloc tensions and the Turkish-Greek conflict in Cyprus.

As the Cold War began to thaw with the coming of détente, some Middle Eastern nations, having become less dependent on the superpowers, were able to orient their foreign policies in ways not readily available previously. Inside Turkey, voices were calling for greater freedom of action in foreign policy, especially toward the Third World and neighboring Arab states. From then on, Ankara's policies were governed by new, more nationalistic precepts, and relations with the West were no longer allowed to interfere with the development of relations with other Muslim nations and the USSR.

The Cyprus crisis broke out in 1964 as a result of growing violence between Greeks and Turks on the island and rapidly escalated into direct Turkish military intervention. Turkey's posture in the crisis caused tensions in relations with Washington. In June 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson sent a letter to Prime Minister İnönü to inform him that should Turkish military involvement in Cyprus bring about Soviet intervention, NATO members would not regard themselves as committed to Turkey's defense. Turkish public opinion reacted strongly to the U.S. position; both government and the public began to reexamine Turkey's international position. Faced with increasing international preoccupation with the Cyprus crisis and frequent UN discussions, Turkey felt an urgent need for support, which it hoped to find in the Arab countries, the Eastern bloc, and the Third World. When Turkey finally moved into Cyprus militarily in July 1974, occupying one-third of the island's territory, U.S.-Turkish relations reached rock bottom. The United States imposed an arms embargo on Turkey, claiming U.S.-supplied weapons were used in operations in Cyprus in contravention of

the terms under which Turkey had received U.S. military assistance in the first place. In response, the Turkish government suspended its defense treaty with the United States and closed down U.S. military installations on its territory. At the same time, indirect military assistance provided by Libya and Iraq during the Cyprus war (particularly jet fuel) made these nations extremely popular with the Turkish public.

First indications of closer relations with the Arab world in the mid-1960s included visits to Turkey by Tunisian president Habib Bourgiba (March 1965), Saudi King Feisal (August 1965), and Iraqi president 'Abd-al-Salaam 'Arif (February 1967). The pace of rapprochement was increased after the Six Day War when Jordan's King Hussein came to Ankara (September 1967), Turkey's prime minister Süleyman Demirel went to Iraq (November 1967), Turkey's president Cevdet Sunay visited Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Iraq (January–April 1968), and Morocco's King Hassan II visited Turkey (April 1968). Such high-level mutual visits among Jordan, Syria, Tunisia, Algeria, and Kuwait continued during the early 1970s. Further strengthening of Turkey's ties with the Muslim world came in September 1969 when the Turks accepted King Hassan's invitation to participate in the Islamic summit convened in protest of an act of arson at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

Still, many in Turkey's establishment wished to be attached in the long run to the West rather than the Third World or the Muslim nations. Several Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, saw the new Turkish policy of strengthening its ties with the Muslim world as political and economic opportunism. Thus Turkey's improved relations with the Arab world in the late 1960s and early 1970s cannot be regarded on the whole as a fundamental change in Ankara's Middle Eastern policy.

Under the special circumstances created by the energy crisis during the 1970s, however, Turkey drew nearer to the Arab world. Among Muslim nations, Turkey was hit hardest by the crisis. On several occasions between 1977 and 1981, its economy came close to total collapse because of severe and enduring shortages of fuel, power, and essential goods. Energy shortages caused grave damage to industry and agriculture, reduced transport to a near standstill, and paralyzed the education and health systems for long periods. The costs of such system failures to the economy as a whole were far greater than the actual cost of the fuel needed to sustain these systems. As an indication of how severely the economy was hurt, in 1980 crude petroleum import costs were 30 percent higher than all of Turkish export revenue, a condition without parallel among Western oil consumers.

This rapid increase in Turkey's oil import bills made it advisable to rely on more than one oil supplier. Besides Iraq, Turkey's traditional supplier, lobbying efforts often amounting to plain begging were directed at Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Libya during the period 1974–1980. Eventually, Turkey came to rely on the goodwill of three major oil suppliers: Iraq, Libya, and Iran.

Turkey's position following the 1973–1974 oil embargo was unusual. As a Muslim nation and a close neighbor of several oil producers, it could have based its oil imports on direct deals with those nations (unlike most other consumers, who had to rely on multinational corporations and the free market). On the other hand, as part of the Western world Turkey could have joined the efforts launched by oil consumers to curb Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) price extravagances and prevent future oil shortages.

Walking this diplomatic tightrope, Turkey tried to enjoy the best of both worlds: its direct supply contracts with producing nations on the one hand and reliance on Western contingency plans on the other. Having created (at least on paper) this dual defense, however, Turkey found itself confronted with a severe and prolonged shortage of fuel, which brought about a lasting change not only in its Middle Eastern policies but also, to an extent, in its social and cultural fabric.

During the period 1974–1981, Turkey's ties with the Arab world strengthened to a remarkable extent. Following the 1974 oil embargo, its economic relations with the oil countries became the foundation of its Middle Eastern policy, whereas economic needs in general took the lead in policy decisionmaking as a whole. A secure oil supply, a rapid increase in export revenues to finance an ever growing oil bill, and employment overseas for surplus labor were vital concerns. This massive dependence on Muslim oil completely changed the patterns of Turkish foreign trade during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Muslim world replaced the West as Turkey's chief export destination.

In the mid-1970s Turkey's leaders attempted to keep separate the country's growing need for oil and its foreign policy. But the inability to pay the ever increasing price demanded for oil made them eventually submit to a series of harsh demands by Iraq and Libya and later by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Initially, these demands were mainly economic, but later political and military demands were made as well. One result was a marked change in Turkey's Middle Eastern policy orientation. The once warm relationship between Turkey and Israel (as allies with the West) grew colder, becoming nearly meaningless by the late 1970s and

remaining so during most of the 1980s. At the same time, as we shall see, the influence of Turkey's strengthening ties with the Muslim world extended from economics and politics into the very fabric of Turkey's society and culture. The main beneficiaries—both economically and politically—were Islamic groups in Turkey, which had long waited for such an opportunity.

An intriguing development in Turkey's relationship with the Muslim oil countries during the 1980s was a complete transformation in the balance of power that had prevailed during the 1970s. At that time, when Turkey was completely dependent on Iraq, Libya, and Iran (accumulating an oil debt of around \$2 billion), issues such as debt rescheduling were among Turkey's most important policy considerations. During the 1980s, however, when oil prices were sagging and the Iran-Iraq War was restructuring military, political, and economic relationships throughout the Middle East and beyond, the situation was reversed. Now Iraq, Iran, and Libya—finding it difficult to finance essential Turkish exports—were offering as payment greater amounts of oil rather than cash. Turkey had never needed such quantities of fuel, and the three nations' cumulative debt to Turkey grew to nearly \$5 billion by the late 1980s.

This economic flip-flop has had far-reaching political consequences. Whereas in the 1970s Muslim oil producers could use Turkey's overdrawn account as political leverage, in the 1980s they were asking for Turkish credit to reschedule their own enormous debts. The needs were desperately the same, but the roles were changed. Frequent defaults by these three nations, which caused several Turkish firms to declare bankruptcy and gave rise to hunger strikes by Turkish workers, cast a shadow on the countries' once strong political ties with Turkey.

Accumulating debts by Iraq, Iran, and Libya and a general reduction in its share of trade with the Muslim world reduced political pressures on Ankara, which once threatened to damage its relations with the West in general and with Israel in particular. Since the mid-1980s Turkey has been growing ever closer to Israel, a process that has included an upgrading of the level of diplomatic representation in both Ankara and Tel Aviv. The fact that Turkey was able to cut off the flow of water to Syria and Iraq for several weeks in early 1990 was a highly dramatic indication of its ability to shrug off its dependence on Muslim goodwill—the dominant feature of Turkey's foreign relations in the nearly forgotten 1970s. Indeed, in January 1992 Turkey and Israel announced

the establishment of full diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level for the first time in history.

Thus a survey of Turkey's relations with the oil countries is in effect the story of the bipolarity of the Muslim world, with the secular-democratic pole represented by Turkey, and the fundamentalist pole by Iran and Saudi Arabia. The rapprochement between Turkey and the Arab nations during the 1970s made few contributions to democratization and modernization in the Arab world, but it did draw Turkey closer to the conservatism that is the hallmark of Muslim politics and toward fundamentalism, from which Turkey had been withdrawing for most of the twentieth century. Only during the 1980s and 1990s was Turkey able to resume its Western orientation, endeavoring to become a full member of the European Common Market and later the European Union.

Islam in Modern Turkey

In the Ottoman Empire, Islam enjoyed a position of paramount importance. From its inception to the end, the empire dedicated itself to the preservation and promotion of Islam. As Bernard Lewis put it, "The Ottoman Sultans gave to the *Şeriat* [Sharia'a], the holy law of Islam, a greater degree of real efficacy than it had had in any Muslim state of high material civilization since early times. In a sense it may be said that the Ottomans were the first who really tried to make the *Şeriat* the effective law of the state."¹ In no other Muslim nation at the time were the Sharia'a so well established or the clergy so politically influential.

Nevertheless, Ottoman Turkey also had close ties with Europe; indeed, for much of its history it encompassed some parts of Europe. Thus the Ottoman elite was well aware of its country's backwardness and weakness compared with European progress. Closing the gap meant instituting far-reaching reforms, which Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk) was determined to impose when he became the first president in 1923. In Kemal's view, Islam's social and political influences bore much of the blame for the erstwhile empire's backwardness. He therefore endeavored to turn Islam from a political force into merely a matter of personal belief. His reforms were, naturally enough, resisted by groups that felt threatened. These groups regarded Kemal's efforts as an attempt to impose European customs on a Muslim nation.

Nevertheless, Kemal persisted and prevailed. He saw the institution

of caliphate as a link tying Turkey to the past from which he wanted to break away, and he abolished it in 1924. This was a decisive blow, soon followed by the abolition of religious schools (replaced by secular ones) and Sharia'a courts of law. The next steps were equally painful, aimed as they were against Islamic symbols: the fez and other religious garments were outlawed in 1925, and the National Assembly rejected Sharia'a in 1926. Under Turkey's new laws, polygamy and offhand divorce of women were abolished, Muslim women were allowed to marry non-Muslim men, and all adults were allowed to convert if they so wished. In April 1928 a crucial step was taken: the article in the constitution that declared Islam to be the state's official religion was dropped, and Turkey officially became a secular nation. Later Turkey dropped other remnants of its Islamic past: the Arabic alphabet was replaced by a Latinized one (1928), and Sunday replaced Friday as the mandatory rest day (1935). The school system was instructed to emphasize studies of Turkey's pre-Islamic past, tracing the roots of modern Turkey to the Hittite Empire (first century B.C.E.).

These reforms were aimed not against religion itself but against its role in politics. From that time on, the clergy no longer controlled politics, society, and culture but was restricted to the mosques. When completed, the Kemalist reforms made religion into another department of the government bureaucracy and the clergy into a group of minor officials. Despite much popular consternation, especially in the rural provinces, the clergy was helpless in the face of Kemal's enormous prestige, charisma, and powerful state machinery.

Yet the Kemalist reforms left a void that could not be filled by either the state or the vestiges of its pre-Islamic past, and the nation was still in search of spiritual and cultural inspiration and a sense of continuity and historical roots. Since the 1940s, Islam has been slowly reestablishing itself in education, society, and even politics. Even today, far from an accomplished fact, secularization is a matter of heated public debate.

The various religious orders have played a major role in the resurgence of Islam in Turkey. During Ottoman times, state religion drifted further and further from popular belief. Religious functionaries became rich, aloof, and hereditary; popular belief was focused instead on the various dervish orders. These orders have remained close to the people, and their influence remained considerable even in republican times. Although officially dismantled and outlawed in 1925, they have kept up their educational, cultural, and social activities. Since the 1960s they