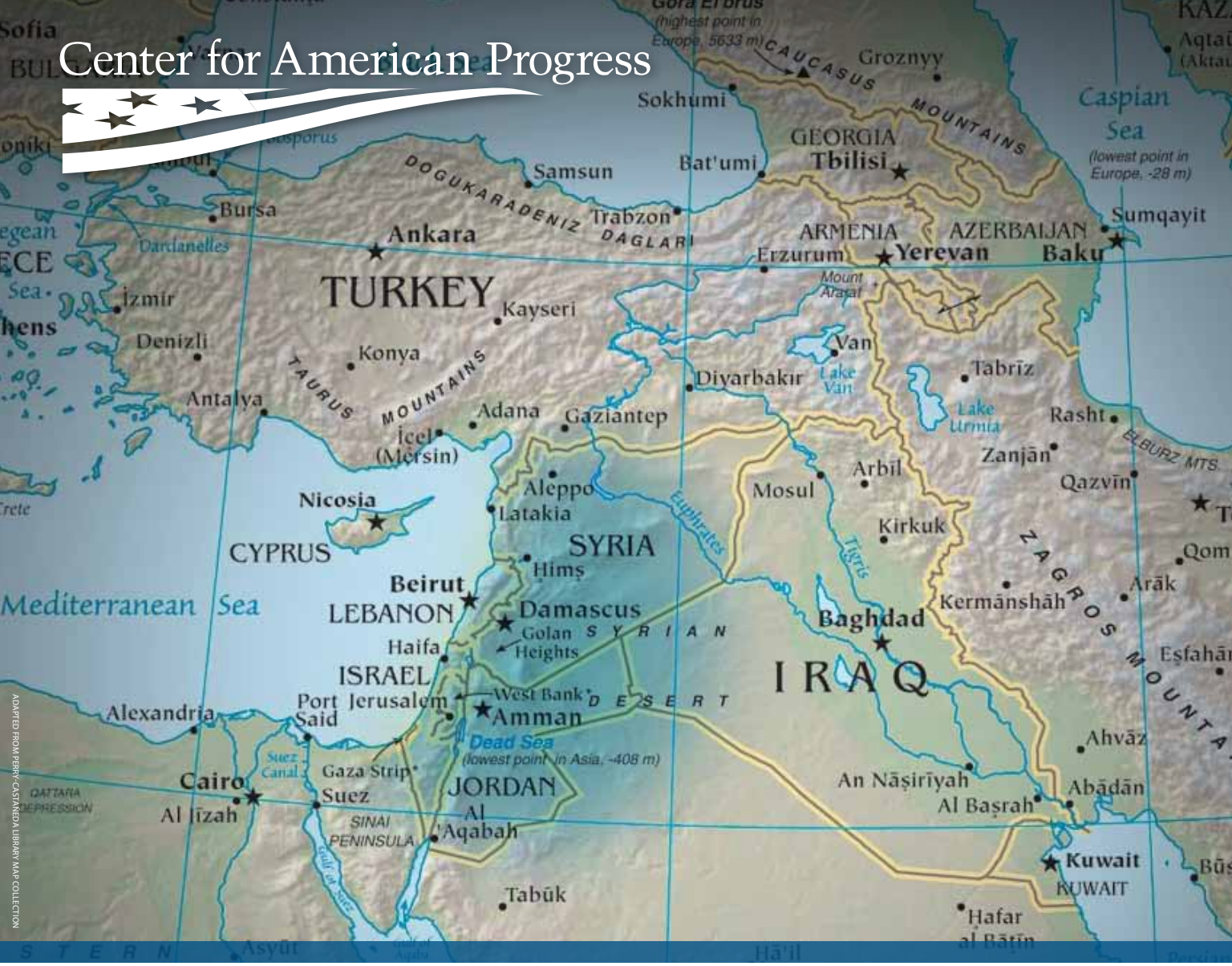


The New Levant

Understanding Turkey's Shifting Roles in the Eastern Mediterranean

Michael Werz May 2010

Introduction and summary

Namik Tan, the new Turkish ambassador to the United States—a veteran diplomat who had served in Washington before and who was recently stationed in Israel—had only a few weeks to enjoy his new post. He was recalled to Ankara in March for almost a month after the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee passed a resolution describing the killings of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire in 1915 as genocide. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also cancelled a visit to Washington, but then decided to attend the nuclear energy summit in mid-April.

Then, a week later, in his recent statement on the occasion of the Armenian Remembrance Day, President Obama spoke of "one of the worst atrocities of the 20th century," clearly acknowledging what has happened in 1915. The reactions were as sharp as they were predictable. Representatives of Armenian groups in the United States have criticized President Obama for not describing the killings as "genocide," at the same time, the Turkish foreign minister labeled the statement "unacceptable" and as "incorrect and one-sided political perception."

Such dramatic, some would say exaggerated, reactions by the Turkish government to charges of genocide almost a century ago amid the collapse of the last empire to control the region illustrates why this old geopolitical arena remains relevant today. Much of the current dynamic in Turkish foreign policy is due to a shift in domestic political power within Turkey to central and eastern regions of the country, which once were considered part of the Levant, alongside a Turkish economic and diplomatic opening toward all the other countries of this ancient region, which includes northern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Cyprus.

The emergence of this new Anatolia—Turkey's Asian provinces—and the changing regional distribution of political power are visible in the city of Adana, a regional center that has received many internal migrants and developed into an energy hub and advanced observation post for the new Levant (see box). Today, most trade lines still go through Istanbul, but this is changing—and the political implications are massive.

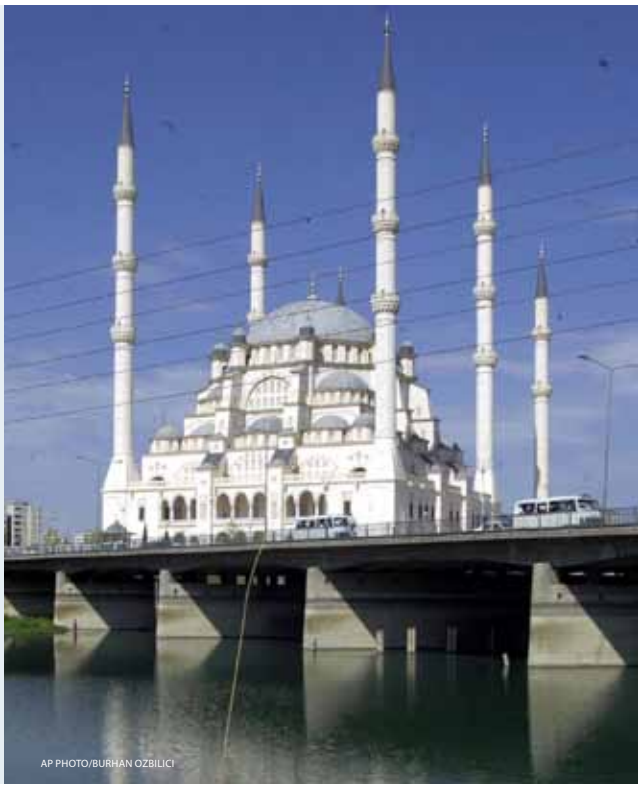
These shifts boast huge policy implications throughout the Middle East. For the United States, it will be important and challenging to develop a more nuanced relationship with Turkey that acknowledges this vibrant yet potentially volatile democracy as an invaluable

Turkey's new link to the Levant

Adana profits from the altered regional environment in Turkey and the Middle East like few other places. It is located only a three-hour bus ride from Aleppo, the second-largest city in Syria, manages 13 percent of Turkey's water resources, and has the country's third-largest agricultural commodity exchange.

In 1990, when Turkey cut off the flow of the Euphrates for a month to fill the Atatürk Reservoir, the country was close to a military confrontation with Syria. Today, visa requirements are gone and with the rediscovered Arab neighbor in view, Adana's Governor Ilhan Atiş said "borders are not natural but in the minds of people."[2]

The city is also a good example of the intrinsic connection between Islam and modernization. It is no coincidence that at the same time the city's first Hilton hotel was built for international and national business travelers, real estate billionaire Sakıp Sabanci erected one of the largest mosques in the Middle East, which can hold almost 30,000 faithful and features minarets 300 feet high. Both buildings, the Hilton and the mosque, are only a stone's throw apart. Both represent different aspects of a new era.



A symbol of the new Levant—the Sabanci mosque in Adana, Turkey.

partner in a wide array of policy fields while incorporating rapidly altering Turkish interests into such a strategy. The Obama administration decided to seize the "opportunity for Ankara and Washington to put behind their differences and past grievances decisively and to concentrate on advancing a more ambitious transatlantic agenda."[1]

Indeed, new geopolitical spaces are coming to life across the new Levant that render foreign policy prescriptions of the Cold War era useless. In the 21st century political diplomacy in this region will be by necessity much more improvisational. Turkey finds itself at the center of this newly developing political constellation in the eastern Mediterranean even as Turkish society grapples with the new roles their nation should or should not play in this new geopolitical dynamic.

What's clear for the United States and Turkey is this—the old parameters of foreign policy in both Washington and Ankara that continue to paint the world in simplistic categories and reductionist analyses akin to the two-dimensional Cold War chessboard of the past century are as outdated as the binary lines of that Cold War-driven "us versus them" mentality.

In the pages that follow, this paper will explore these trends within Turkey and across its borders throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Understanding how Turkey is changing itself and its region is critical to U.S. foreign policy. Knowing how to respond is even more important. This paper begins to build a map to achieve both goals.

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