

Turkish summit: 'Meeting to Change'

Written by Eric Walberg

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The Leaders of Change summit 13-14 March in Istanbul was hosted by the Turkish Futures



Researches Foundation (TUGAV) founded in 1987. The theme was “Changing to meet, meeting to change”, emphasising the radical changes in policymakers’ thinking now taking place and the importance of sharing new ideas to address the urgent problems facing particularly the Middle East.

The summit was the first of what TUGAV President Ahmet Eyup Ozguc plans to be an annual forum supported by the Turkish government and Istanbul University. Just as the G8 is losing out to a more representative G20 in global economic decision-making, the Turkish organisers intend that such summits can shift attention away from gatherings such as the elitist World Economic Forum (WEF) and provide a more democratic platform for voices of change.

Like the WEF, it provided the opportunity for world leaders to meet. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had meetings with Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidential Council Member Bakir Izzetbegovic, Iraqi Vice Presidents Adil Abdulmehdi and Tariq Al

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Hashimi, Iraqiyya List Leader Iyad Allawi, Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Tachi, Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov,

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ormer Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi

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UNDP Director Helen Clark

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ormer UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in the context of the summit.

The summit also provided a forum for politicians, religious leaders, academics, and journalists to debate current events and likely scenarios for the region. Taking place in the wake of the revolutions against pro-Western dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, perhaps the most important theme was that **security and democracy** are not mutually exclusive. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu pointed to the new found “self-esteem and self-confidence” of Egyptians, their becoming “the subject of change”. Only when people know that their voices are heard and respected is a secure, stable development of society possible. During the Cold War and again after 9/11, the paradigm was to compromise freedoms

to buttress the security of the state. The Turkish Justice and Development Party (AK) rejected this compromise. "Security and freedom reinforce each other," argued Davutoglu.

Turkey's own self-confidence has contributed to a greater sense of trust in the region, especially after the Davos WEF meeting in 2009, when the Turkish prime minister refused to share the stage with Israeli President Shimon Peres in protest at the Israeli invasion of Gaza. The insecurity caused by such

atrocities must end if peace is to come to the region, and expressing the broad anger against them publicly is an essential step, the obligation of moral, democratic leadership, to move towards a secure peace for all, said the foreign minister.

Another theme stressed by Prime Minister Erdogan, is that **“Islam and democracy go side by side** .” This is confirmed by the past decade of Turkish politics, dominated by the AK, where new dynamism has been

injected into Turkey's politics by basing its development on principles of good relations with neighbours, social justice and personal morality, features which were lacking in Turkish politics. It is further confirmed by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, where Muslims, Christians and secularists came together to demand an end to corrupt dictatorships.

Turkey's own democracy is a heated affair, as demonstrations by Turkish journalists in the streets of Istanbul

during the summit affirmed. Currently there are dozens of journalists in jail, whom the prime minister said were not imprisoned as journalists but accused of abetting the so-called Ergenekon military plot to overthrow the government. Whatever the outcome of this stand-off between the government and its civil society critics, the demonstrations and the openness of the Turkish press could not be denied. National elections are scheduled for June, and Turkey has a strong tradition of honest elections.

Turkey's new high profile in the region was remarked upon by many. US writer Stephen Kinzer noted that the past decade in Turkey has witnessed its metamorphosis from US junior partner to a state now reaching out to many countries to try to break the deadlock on a range of issues, including the stand-off between the West and Iran and that between the West and Russia. "Turkish influence is welcomed by so many different factions." Kinzer attributed this to Turkey's ability to reconcile Islam and democracy, Islam and capitalism, as well as to its religious legacy, its ability to create positive ideas where there is a political vacuum, and its emphasis on negotiations, both internal and external.

Given Israeli occupation of Jerusalem, the historical symbol of peace now a symbol of conflict, Ali Mazrui, director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at New York State University, suggested Istanbul could take on this symbolic role as “a new city of understanding, a secular Jerusalem, a synthesis of civilisations.”

Kinzer criticised US policy as reactive, suffering from a superiority complex: “The US thinks it understands the Middle East best. It is used to subservience, to giving advice rather than taking it.” The new situation is “a tsunami which has not reached Washington”. He urged US policymakers to recognise that it is Turkey in the Middle East that is the best partner for the US: “It is a society like ours. Its long term strategic goals are the same – Middle East stability.” US reliance on “hard power” must give way to the new, dominant “soft power”.

The need to see **today's changes in historical perspective**

was stressed by Bathounia Shaaban, adviser to Syrian President Bashir Al-Assad. While “the fall of the Berlin Wall” was generally seen as the inspiration behind recent changes in the Middle East, which have come “20 years too late” according to Davutoglu, Shaaban disagreed: “The changes are 90 years too late. What’s happening now should have happened instead of the Sykes-Picot agreement of WWI between Britain, France and Russia to carve up the Middle East into weak colonies.”

Shaaban described “the bloody, terrible ‘change’ brought to the region by the imperialists” with the creation of Israel and now the invasion of Iraq, killing millions. “The US understands very well what it is doing. It has never intended to bring freedom and democracy, but rather to take oil, protect Israel, and to try to keep the Arab world outside history.” She predicted that “in 10 years, we will see how Turkey played an important role in creating positive change in the region.”

Ross Wilson, former US ambassador to Turkey and director of the Eurasia Centre at the Atlantic Council, warned that “the new order will be disorder”, that “allies like the US and Turkey will have to cooperate to shape this disorder to create stability and democracy, a lesson which has been retaught to us in recent years.”

Misconceptions such as Orientalism, the clash of civilisations and the end of history were criticised as **stumbling blocks in achieving peace in the Middle East**

Orientalism, the Euro-centrism that dominates relations, assumes "history flows from a single centre." The US, as epitomised by the views of Bernard Lewis and Richard Pipes, assume that dictatorship is endemic to the Arab world, that it can't be democratic by definition. This paternalism, as Kinzer pointed out, is the major factor motivating US policy in the Middle East and holding the Arab world back.

Abraham Kalin, adviser to the Turkish PM, argued that “peace means more than lack of war.” It means overcoming these prejudices and recognising the importance of adequate welfare, prosperity. Achieving peace is complex, “not just the snowball effect” of building momentum, but recognising “the butterfly effect”, where events affect other events in a complex pattern. “Wisconsin demonstrators were inspired by protesters in Tunisia and Egypt”, seeing their struggle as similarly trying to bring down a dictator. “History can reverse itself,” he argued, and surprised listeners with the words of Lenin: “Sometimes decades pass and nothing happens; and then sometimes weeks pass and decades happen.”

The bottom line for Kalin is a concerted effort to recognise the 1967 borders in Palestine as the only solution to the crisis there. “There is not need for any more ‘processes’.” Turkish journalist Cengiz Candar dismissed even the possibility of a two-state solution as no longer possible. He sees Turkey as a possible negotiator between the Palestinians and Israelis, though the latter will have to make a radical change in their attitude, since their two main rivals at present – Turkey and Iran – are now working together. Candar predicted an Egypt-Turkey-Iran as the coming axis of power, and advised Israel

to seek rapprochement with Turkey as soon as possible if it knows what's good for it.

Turkey's approach to the newly independent Balkan states is being formulated now. Murat Mercan, president of the Turkish Parliamentary Foreign Relations Commission, described the Ottoman period as one of relative harmony and balance among dozens of ethnic groups, including Christians, Muslims and Jews. While he approved of the move to re-integrate

them through NATO and the EU, he criticised EU “double standards” towards members, and the Euro-spats over Kosovo and Macedonia. He called for Turkish involvement economically to create “greater interdependency between cities” and “to maintain the multicultural, religious, and ethnic fabric of the region, noting that there are many ethnic Balkans living in northern Turkey. Omer Ozkaya, editor of *Turkquie Diplomatique* and head of the East-West Researches Institute, noted the social collapse in the region following the civil war in the 1990s and the dangers of the region becoming a drug-smuggling corridor.

Bulent Arinc, deputy prime minister, praised Turkey's new "zero-problem" foreign policy approach, emphasising negotiations intends to recreate a 21st century regional neo-Ottoman peace, now "based on openness and democracy". The cancelling of visa requirements with Albania, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya and Syria in 2009, and later with Russia, Egypt and others is evidence of this intent. The marine border problems with Greece were resolved and tensions in Cyprus eased, "not with a fist. You need to open your fist to shake hands." He vowed that the current government would resolve the

Armenian conflict, encouraging more trade and cultural exchanges.

“Neighbours shouldn’t fight. We have the will to resolve outstanding disputes.”

The **environmental crisis** and Turkey’s place in overcoming it was a final theme. Former US vice president Al Gore gave a keynote speech calling on Turkey to embrace \$550 billion plans to “harvest” solar and wind power in the Sahara and North Africa and transmit it to power-starved Europe, the 2009

DESERTEC Industrial Initiative. By 2050 the Sahara Desert could be satisfying 15 per cent of the EU's electricity needs. Gore emphasised it would provide millions of skilled jobs in North Africa, though issues of control, excessive dependency and pollution in building and maintaining this supergrid were not raised.

Others took a more philosophical approach to the environment, George Washington University Professor Hossein Nasr describing nature as in

constant change but with permanence in its patterns of change. He criticised modernism and secularism as the source of the intolerance and violence we (and nature) experience today, calling for a move away from brain-centred rationalism towards a heart-centred identity. "The Arab word for heart *qalb* also means change, and Allah is the changer of changes, changer of hearts."

Greek Orthodox Patriarch
Bartholomoes, a pioneer in

environmentalism, emphasised that environmental and social justice are inseparable, agreeing with Nasr that change is “the way of the heart, where God, humanity and the world coincide. Change must come from inside and peace will only come through surrender of desires and embracing love and generosity.”

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