

Turgut Özal Twenty Years After: The Man and the Politician

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ABSTRACT *Whether Turgut Özal was a good politician remains up for debate. However, there is no question that he indeed was (and is) a significant historical persona. He guided his country into the twenty-first century. When Özal suddenly passed away in 1993, he had already led Turkey to the next century, even though the twenty-first century would technically begin only seven years later.*

Among the numerous commentaries published following Turgut Özal's death, it was the following remark that struck me the hardest: "Turgut Bey was not a good politician. For he was a good man."

This was the most striking assessment to me because it was his qualities as a good man that marked me in our frequent encounters over the final two years of his life. Turgut Özal was an extremely courageous man, who did not seem to possess the supposedly indispensable qualities of any good politician: ruthlessness and *the killing instinct*.

He admired the Ottoman sultans of the Empire's classical period for their

political skills. In particular, he held in high regard Sultan Abdulhamid II, an Ottoman sultan of the last period of the Empire of equally high caliber. I remember his expressed admiration for Mehmed the Conqueror, Selim I, Suleiman the Magnificent, Murad II and Bayezid II, whom he would refer to with a facial expression overshadowed by a sense of inadequacy and modesty: "What kind of men were they? How did they rule over such vast lands and such a diverse population? Look at us, and look at them!"

The people he talked about were rulers with absolute power, great might and enough fortitude to send their siblings and even sons to their deaths for "the well-being of the state," while

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Turgut Özal felt he was the product of a country restricted by the nation-state ideology of the past century and a multi-party democracy. He had a different set of qualities. He could not resemble them. He was the kind of man who was compassionate toward people, devoid of wrath, quick to forget his rage, and good-hearted. Turgut Özal was a good man.

I was glad to see that my impression of him was accurate when Hüsnü Doğan, Özal's beloved cousin, who also served as a cabinet member in multiple governments, told me about the following instance:

At some point, Turgut Özal and Hüsnü Doğan had a falling out. When the two supported opposite candidates for the Motherland Party's provincial offices in Istanbul during the split that eventually led Mesut Yılmaz to become Chairman and Prime Minister, Özal had criticized Hüsnü

Doğan in a rather harsh manner. Later developments proved Doğan right.

Following Özal's death, Taha Akyol and I had hosted Hüsnü Doğan at a television show where he spoke very highly of the late President. When Taha Akyol referred to the aforementioned dispute and asked him specifically what he thought about the matter, Doğan looked down for a few seconds, and offered a brief response following a brief moment of silence: "Turgut Özal was a good man!"

A Monumental Figure

Whether that good man was also a good politician remains up for debate. However, there is no question that he indeed was (and is) a significant historical persona. For me, Özal was the most important figure in the Republic's history after (or alongside, for that matter) Mustafa Kemal

Early in the 1980s, he was one of the rare people that could foresee the Soviet Union's approaching demise and began to forge a vision for the future based on that prediction

Atatürk. I voiced this claim by defining Özal as “the man who carried Turkey from the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.” In that regard, he was, indeed, a monumental figure.

History's periodization in school textbooks differs from its compartmentalization by world-renowned and influential historians –one of whom was the late Eric Hobsbawm. For the textbooks the twentieth century starts by January 1st, 1900 and ends on midnight of December 31st, 1999. According to latter, however, it was the Great War in 1914 that closed the nineteenth century and started the twentieth century. Similarly, the twentieth century ended in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell and thus bringing to an end the Cold War.

It was in this sense that Turgut Özal guided his country into the twenty-first century. When he suddenly

passed away in 1993, he had already led Turkey to the next century, even though the twenty-first century would technically begin only seven years later.

It was Özal's strong foresight that established him as an extraordinary historic figure. Early in the 1980s, he was one of the rare people that could foresee the Soviet Union's approaching demise and began to forge a vision for the future based on that prediction. Özal voiced this opinion in a careful yet comprehensive manner. Özal's contemporaries, who were intent on viewing him as a classic right-wing politician, did not heed his words by attributed them to Özal's anti-communist or anti-Soviet bias deeply rooted in his dislike of the Left. Turgut Özal, however, was not a man to let himself be boxed into conventional categories and qualified as leftist or rightist. It was his visionary nature –rightfully attributed to him– that allowed Özal to predict the Soviet Union's demise. For him, In the post-Brezhnev period, following the short-lived tenures of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power and adoption of *perestroika* and *glasnost* as well as developments in Eastern Europe – the Soviet Union's historic sphere of influence– signalled the fated disintegration of the regime and its socialist model. Before long, the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union ceased to exist a year later.

Turgut Özal's accurate understanding on the new stage in world history, globalization, and its various dynam-

ics and indications fueled his gift of swift foresight. It is quite probable that Özal, a trained engineer who has become aware of the broader and

where he received his high school education. Briefly after graduating from Istanbul Technical University as an electrical engineer, he entered into state service and joined the first class of Turkish engineers that travelled to the United States for an internship.

Özal's dream was to establish a *Turkic World* among the former Soviet republics possessing *Turkic cultural, linguistic and historical commonalities* and to present Turkey as a pole of attraction alongside Azerbaijan

larger world outside of Turkey by the early 1950s had a major part in shaping his own sharp outlook.

Turgut Bey –this was how those close to him referred to him- represented a curious synthesis between his bonds with tradition and his union with modernity. What fundamentally distinguished Özal from his former boss and political archrival, Süleyman Demirel, was his urban middle class background. While Demirel – also an alumnus of Istanbul Technical University whom Özal viewed as an older brother- was a rich villager, Özal was born into a family of civil servants. Having been born in a relatively urban setting in Malatya, he resided in various small towns like Bilecik-Söğüt and Silifke during his father's service. He spent his early adulthood in provincial centers like Mardin and Konya, where he finished middle school, and in Kayseri

Özal used the following words when he described to me how the Manhattan skyline made him feel when he first set foot in New York along with a group of his colleagues: “The contrast between the poverty and underdevelopment of the country we came from and the view before our eyes led me to contemplate what have they done to succeed and what we have not. What gave them superiority over us? At the moment, questions popped up in my mind regarding the validity of such proverbs as “a Turk is worthy of the whole world.”

A Man of Distinct Qualities and Personality

One of Turgut Özal's most striking qualities was to inquire and search endlessly. Knowing that I was an activist during the left-wing student revolts of 1968, he would constantly ask me about that period and particularly enjoy listening to my stories. He also used to draw my attention to his credentials as somewhat of a “rebel” and take pride in his leading role in protests during Field Marshal Fevzi Çakmak's funeral in 1948.

That is to say: by the 1990s, left-wing and right-wing politics did not mean much to Turgut Özal. His

main concern were to innovate, to change (both oneself and others), to challenge and break the taboos and therefore be unconventional, to have the courage to revolt and to be skillful at it. It was particularly this approach that allowed him to have a working relationship with many people with different ideological backgrounds. While remaining loyal to their ideologies, they also remained loyal to him and worked for him. Turgut Özal was reminiscent of an intersection where many different streets and roads met. His specific blend of leadership was unparalleled among his predecessors and remained unrivalled by any politician that came to occupy either of his previous posts.

As such, while his skills as a politician and statesman remain up for debate, it is clear that Özal was a special breed of leader.

Turkey's foreign policy unmistakably reflects Turgut Özal's views that not only carried the country into the twenty-first century through reforms but also paved the way for its unquestionable rise in the international arena during the first decade of the new century.

A Dreaming Realist

As history affirmed Özal's prediction that the Cold War would end shortly after the Soviet Union's demise, he embarked on an audacious attempt to design Turkey's vision for the twenty-first century. His historic address to the 3rd Izmir Economic Congress

on June 4-7, 1992 manifested these ideals in their clearest form. Furthermore, Özal attributed particular importance to this address as the event marked his first public appearance since his operation in Houston, Texas.

In his historic speech that established the framework for Turkey's profile for the century ahead, Özal pointed out that "gates of divine favor" had opened up before the country that can only occur once in several centuries.

Özal's dream was to establish a *Turkic World* among the former Soviet republics possessing *Turkic cultural, linguistic and historical commonalities* and to present Turkey as a pole of attraction alongside Azerbaijan.

He understood that the Cold War's aftermath would inevitably create new independent entities in the Balkans and the Caucasus and emphasized the importance of rekindling relations with these regions –in Turkey's hinterland- and in the context of Turkey's new geopolitics based on their historic character as Ottoman territories.

This perspective inevitably called for a new approach toward the Middle East –another former Ottoman domain. According to Özal, the Cold War's end and the Soviet Union's disintegration presented the country with an opportunity to exert more influence than ever over a wide geopolitical area. In addition to the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus,

Özal envisaged a pivotal role for Turkey in Central Asia, a region where the Turks had practically no connections after a millenium of separation. He, therefore, argued that “the gates of divine favor” had opened up before his country in an extremely rare historic opportunity.

The Gulf Crisis that followed Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the US-led international coalition’s war against Iraq in January 1991 provided Özal with a brand new perspective on Turkey and the world. He foresaw that Saddam could not last in battle and the strong central state in Iraq would be vulnerable and even face destruction. Iraq, an artificial country, which the British sewed together by bringing together three former Ottoman provinces, Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra would either disintegrate or restructure even if it maintained its territorial integrity.

Either scenario would call for Turkey’s involvement. As early as the initial days of the Crisis, he told me that the central government’s demise would create a power vacuum in Iraq and that politics, much like nature, would not tolerate vacuum. He believed that Turkey had to involve itself in order to prevent hostile powers from filling that vacuum. This perspective embodied the reasoning behind Turkey’s emerging proactive foreign policy in the face of the Gulf Crisis and the Gulf War.

Having resorted to the Kemalist principle of “Peace in the motherland, peace in the world” to conceal its re-



Turgut Özal giving press conference at Çankaya.

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liance on independence and central planning in economy and inaction in foreign policy, Turkey reacted badly to Özal’s leap forward during the Gulf Crisis. The eighth President of Turkey was now a man to whom Yıldıırım Akbulut, Chairman of the Motherland Party and Prime Minister, and Mesut Yılmaz, Akbulut’s eventual successor, turned their backs to him.

Even during this period of great isolation, Özal demonstrated his iconoclasm and courage by tackling Turkey’s single greatest problem: the Kurdish question.

Forerunner of the Resolution of the Kurdish Issue

Turgut Özal believed in maintaining close relations with the Kurds in or-

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der to have a say in Iraq's future. Notwithstanding the Gulf War's outcome, he was convinced that Iraq could not revert to its pre-war status quo and therefore deemed it necessary to develop better relations not only with Turkmens but also with the Kurds. As the Shia population would be naturally open to Iranian influence and the Sunni Arabs would understandably welcome members of the Arab world, Özal was confident that Turkey was compelled to become closer with the Kurds.

Talks between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, including Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani, eventually led the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party to establish contact offices in Ankara, reflected Özal's vision. One of *the* greatest taboos of the Republic was undone at the hands of Turgut Özal. The Özal-initiated efforts turned the Kurdistan Regional

Government with Arbil as its capital, into the integration area for Turkey across the region. It was, therefore, Özal who laid the foundation for encouraging developments in Turkey's relations with the Kurds today.

The initiation of a rapprochement with Iraqi Kurds could not have been possible if Turkey's own Kurds were ignored or if the long-standing "Kurdish policy" had not been radically transformed. As a matter of fact, Turgut Özal gradually tackled the existing policy on Turkey's Kurdish population and turned the approach upside down.

Özal took initial steps toward ending Turkey's policy of denial and acknowledging the Kurdish identity. Hopes that cut across the society in Turkey for resolving the Kurdish question reached a historic high during his tenure. It was no coincidence that the PKK nurtured hopes for a non-violent solution to the Kurdish question by declaring its first-ever ceasefire on March 16th, 1993. This was a result of Özal's by-proxy efforts through Jalal Talabani. A month later, the organization declared an unconditional, indefinite extension of its ceasefire. Unfortunately, Özal passed away a day later, on April 17th, 1993. Shortly after his untimely death, the ceasefire ended and Turkey witnessed the bloodiest era in the history of the Kurdish question. The country lost an entire decade. Still, Turgut Özal went down in history as the first President of Turkey that wholeheartedly wanted to resolve the Kurdish question, took risks even under the most unfavor-

able circumstances, lit up the hope for peace and thereby became a beloved political figure among Turkey's Kurdish population.

Turgut Bey's approach to Kurds was not only driven by political objectives but also had humane motives. In our private conversations, he once told me that Allah would hold him accountable for his actions regarding the resolution of the Kurdish question, because as the President of Tur-

Özal imagined Turkey to be a pivotal player in the geopolitics of the Balkans-Caucasus axis as well as Russia and the Black Sea region

key resolving this issue was laid upon his shoulders and his responsibility. For him, the Kurdish question was first and foremost a matter of humanity and conscience.

The "good man" also had a remarkable mathematical brain, which he put to work in evaluating the emerging post-Cold War world. This new framework would see a unipolar international order's replacement of a bipolar international system. The only remaining superpower after the Soviet Union's demise was the United States. I once told Turgut Bey that this unipolar setting was unprecedented since the Roman Empire and that even Rome split into two in line with the principle of dialectics. As such, I posited that the unipolar internation-

al order with the United States as its sole superpower represented a "state of anomaly." Turgut Bey expressed what I meant by the "state of anomaly" in the jargon of mathematics: "I refer to this as an *unstable equilibrium*. This cannot last indefinitely. I do not know whether this unstable equilibrium shall survive for twenty, thirty, even fifty years or more, but I do know that it cannot last."

Although only about two decades have passed since his death, there is now talk of an emerging multipolarity featuring China, probably as well as India, the European Union and Russia, etc. gradually replacing the unipolarity that exist into today's international system.

Turgut Özal's command over the economy and globalization, open-mindedness and uninhibited focus on forging an influential and powerful country for the twenty-first century allowed him to keep in mind that the global economy's center of gravity would shift toward the Asia-Pacific region. As such, he became the first Turkish statesman to visit Australia and New Zealand. He had been to Japan and China on numerous occasions. If it had not been for his untimely death on April 17th, 1993, he would have visited China again and Indonesia.

Özal also imagined Turkey to be a pivotal player in the geopolitics of the Balkans-Caucasus axis as well as Russia and the Black Sea region. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation's establishment under

the leadership of Turkey and the Russian Federation to bring together all countries in the Balkans and the Caucasus was one of Özal's projects. He sought to create a NAFTA-like structure with Turkey at its center and forge special relations with member states. Moreover, it is necessary to keep in mind that Özal, who designed this entire mechanism, also played an instrumental role in Turkey's application to European Economic Community membership, as the country's Prime Minister in 1987.

All of this reflected Turgut Özal's ambition to transform Turkey into one of the top and most advanced countries of the twenty-first century and make it into one of the world's "ruling powers." If we were to imagine the unipolar international order as a worldwide enterprise, Turkey desired to be an Executive Board member at an organizational setting where the United States would function as the CEO. Although economic progress was rather important to achieve this goal, Turkey also needed to translate its geopolitical value in a new world order into its politics to reach its goals for the twenty-first century.

Turgut Özal also believed that it was an impossible venture to become a rich country, a strong society, and a great power without mobilizing the creative energy of all citizens. All this required a functioning democracy, an open society, and rule of law to safeguard these mechanisms. Contrary to accusations of prioritizing economic development over democracy commonly voiced by his

critiques and others who did not (or could not) understand him, Özal had quite different inclinations. In the summer of 1992, I visited him at his holiday resort near Marmaris and noticed a book on his desk. I could not believe that he would read that book. The book was titled *Free Speech in an Open Society* and authored by a Supreme Court justice. When I asked him whether *he* was reading this book, he looked at me as if he was offended, retorted saying: "So what? Are you one of those who believe that I only read Lucky Luke comics? Of course I am reading it. This is an important issue!"

Following that encounter, we made a pact. During his visits to foreign countries, especially the United States, I would buy him the same books that I purchased for myself, as he was not in a position to visit bookstores. I actually did it. I even added a few more titles that I thought would benefit him more than myself. I could not possibly imagine that he would be able to go through two luggages full of books. One night, when he was on his computer at the Presidential Palace, I was discreetly looking into the books on his study room's shelves. At that point, he got up to show me which of the books I purchased he had already read and those in the line waiting to be read.

Once with an intention of praising him, I had remarked that his naivete made it possible for him to impress members of the American elite following his address in his not-so-good English during a luncheon with the

dean of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and other members of the American intellectual elite. He objected to be described as "naïve." As I tried in vain to explain that the term meant "to have a good heart," not a deficit of intelligence, he was adamant and would not be dissuaded. He made his point in a more accurate description of himself: "I am '*candid*,'" he told me, "not naïve. I speak candidly. That is to say, I do not hold back. Americans appreciate and value a candid man even if they may not like what they hear from him."

He was right.

He passed away twenty years ago and I remember Turgut Özal as viv-

idly as ever. As a "good man" and a "kind-hearted person" whenever I think of him. And, I have not ever forgotten him.

During the final months of his life, Özal's heart was filled with the troubles of the people of Bosnia. He deemed it a primary duty for the President of Turkey to do something about the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, this was not only a political necessity but also a reflection of his kind-hearted nature. Whenever the subject of Bosnia came up –which it did quite frequently at the time- tears would run down from Turgut Bey's eyes.

Turgut Bey was a good man. A very good man! ■