

TURKEY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A TPQ EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH SÜLEYMAN DEMİREL

By Nigar Göksel

Turkey's 9th President Süleyman Demirel was in active politics for over 35 years, serving as prime minister for almost 12 years in total and finally as president before his retirement in 2000. His vast experience in Turkey's own democratization process holds many lessons that are relevant for the countries of the region. In the interview we conducted with him, President Demirel shares his views on the state of democracy in the region, identifying the fundamental dynamics of a functioning democracy and cautioning against quick fixes that can divide rather than unite. Demirel criticizes both the Turkish governments management of relations with the US and the management of Turkey's public opinion on the Iraq issue. As for Turkey's regional role, Demirel believes improving its own institutions and practices is the most effective way for Turkey to contribute to the goal of democratization in the Middle East.



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TPQ: What are the main barriers to democratization in the Middle East? Is it on its way? Should the developments in Lebanon be considered exceptional or isolated incidents? Do you consider it as the start of a greater change in the region?

Demirel: We have to be sure what we mean when we say Middle East. The Middle East is Turkey, the Middle East is Iran, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt. We also have to include some of the African countries such as Sudan and Somalia in the Middle East. Pakistan is subject to debate. Sometimes, it is closely involved in the problems of the Middle East. However, in the strict sense of the word, the Middle East covers Israel, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates in the Gulf. First of all, the Middle East is heterogeneous. It is composed of peoples and countries which differ in their cultures, religions, languages and political traditions. In most of these countries, “democracy” is rarely mentioned.

My belief is that it is wrong to consider all these countries as one big entity named the Middle East. We can not generalize the problems of all these different countries. Each of them has to be evaluated individually as far as democratization is concerned. Maybe we should start with Israel.

Israel has established one of the most powerful democracies in the world. It is hard to apply the same democratic conditions to other countries. Israel’s democracy unites the people of the country with its government. There is no other country in the region which includes this in its daily agenda. In Israel each citizen is a different political party and the political parties try to unite groups who have different views. Each citizen has power. However politics is not abandoned to the man on the street because the man on the street can be misled very easily. Of course the man on the street is taken into consideration, and that is why there are inconsistencies. However, on major issues for the general interests of the country, the Israeli politician is not surrendered to the man on the street. □

Palestine is not a state yet. There is a Palestinian Administration but there is not an independent state. As far as I am concerned, the Palestinian Administration is the closest country to this kind of democracy. People have suffered a lot and they have very well educated Palestinians. These people play the main role and have a lot of influence in governance. This means Palestine is not only a terrorist organization, Palestine is not only Intifada, all Palestinians are not terrorists who throw stones at the Israeli police. These people recognize elections. They respect elections.

Of course democracy is not only elections but there is a political dictum, “free and fair elections.” There should be an elected assembly and a government which received the vote of confidence of the assembly. Whether a presidential system or a parliamentary system, the majority of the citizens should determine the

executive power. Elections should periodically be repeated. Then comes the main characteristics of democracy such as free justice, free media, free streets, free university and freedom of conscience. The country which unites these shall be successful in its democratization attempt.

The next closest country to these criteria is Iraq. By invading Iraq, the United States and other allied countries have committed themselves to bring democracy. This is now their duty and responsibility towards the people of the world and the citizens of Iraq. The President of the U.S. said, in February 2005, before the American Congress, that they came to Iraq to establish *democracy, that the Iraqi people will be governed by a better administration and that they would provide the Iraqis with wealth.*

There is a clear relationship between wealth and democracy. If we look at the world's economy 86 percent of the global income belongs to democratic countries, which represents only 40 percent of the world's population. Democracy is freedom, human dignity, and again as I said, it has a lot to do with wealth. Iraq is among the closest countries to democracy in the region. Some successful steps have been taken in this direction. A new constitution entered into force, new elections were held. If Iraq is able to maintain its territorial integrity - it is due to the efforts of its freely elected assembly which unites free political organizations. The claim in Iraq is universal. When Saddam was in power he was considered cruel and according to the majority of Iraqis, he was cruel. He maintained territorial integrity by cruel methods. Now democracy is being experimented with Iraq with territorial integrity being maintained. This is an important experiment for the whole region.

The Greater Middle East Project covers the area between Morocco and Pakistan. We have twenty-two different states and these twenty-two states' population sums up to 300 million, and a total GNP of 700-800 billion dollars. Whereas Spain has 44 million and its GNP is 800 billion dollars. What I mean is these 300 million, mostly Muslim Arabs, are supposed to possess 66 percent of world's oil. But as we know, this oil is owned only by a certain number of people in these countries.

If this system continues it will be very hard to keep the social peace in these countries. If one day democracy is established in most of these countries, the oil income of any state will be enough to get rid of poverty and educate its people. The political system in these countries is not chosen by the citizens' will. This means there still is tyranny.

If the problems in Middle East countries are not solved, the world's peace will again be threatened and people like Osama Bin Ladin will continue to undertake terrorist activities. The main goal of this war against terrorism is to establish peace in the world. It is hard to impose democracy on people. Other countries may help to promote democracy but citizens of the Middle Eastern countries need to be willing to have a democratic administration. If another country helps them

form a puppet government, this will also be a failure. The will of the people plays an important role in each country for this Greater Middle East project. Although there are many unknowns, the goal is right. But how will this be handled? In the end, if this project reaches its set goals, I think one of the most important strategic areas in the world will be united and the bridge between east and west will be stronger.

As Europe was demolished after World War II, it had to be reconstructed. Later, Europe became more powerful and wealthier than ever before. In Europe, per capita income is 25,000 dollars. As we all know, Europe was restructured by the Marshall Plan and Truman doctrine. Now the Middle East will be restructured by the Bush doctrine, namely the Greater Middle East doctrine. □

The region between Morocco and Pakistan has the richest petroleum, natural gas and carbon reserves in the world, so the entire planet will profit from these natural sources if we all help these countries implement democracy, as well as peace in the region.

Of course the people who control these natural sources today, will not easily abandon their grip on power. Once citizens have power, it will not be easy to change the regime against the people's will. Up until now, it was said that there was stability in the region, but the cost of this stability was a loss of freedom or simply, dictatorial regimes. If there really was stability in the region, there should not have been wars. You have to implement democracy to establish real stability in the Middle East.

Democracy does not always mean efficient administration. The citizens of each country need to be informed and democratic institutions should all be in place. This will produce free market and free trade economies. Liberal economies need entrepreneurship and economic dynamism of this region is crucial for the global economy.

Turkey is completely different from all the other Middle Eastern countries. Its advanced cultural history played an important role during its democratization period, namely the transition period from a one party system to a multi party system.

U.S. alone can not produce democratization in the region. The people of the countries which will be subject to this experiment will, of course, call this 'American imperialism' and all these complaints will trigger anti-Americanism. As a result, even if you try to help some countries, they may consider you an enemy. This is a very complex situation. What I mean by complex is that the implementation of democracy is a hard task. Let's all hope that there will not be any bloodshed during this period of stabilization. And when I say stabilization, I do not mean dictatorial stabilization or a Pax Romana stabilization, but rather democratic stabilization.

TPQ: What kind of a role can Turkey play during this period? Is deterioration of Turkey's relations with the U.S. going to hinder Turkey's regional influence? Is the perception of Turkey by the Middle East a barrier to Turkey's playing an active role?

Demirel: As we all know Turkey is a Muslim country - I mean as far as the greater percentage of the population is concerned. It is also a secular country. All the countries I mentioned in this region are Muslim countries except Israel. These Muslim countries do not accept secularism. They think Islam and secularism cannot coexist. This makes it difficult for them to see Turkey as an example. Once upon a time, most of these countries were within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. The states, which were created after World War I, presented the Ottoman Empire as an enemy in order to unite their people. Since Turkey is the successor of the Ottoman Empire there has always been animosity. These countries do not have friendly chapters about Turkey in their school books. Most importantly, they find Turkey distant to Islam. So it is not very easy for the peoples of these countries to consider Turkey a role model.

The Ottoman Empire invaded these countries against their will, but in my view, the administration of the Empire was successful. We can easily recognize this in the example of Palestine. For 400 years Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in peace in Palestine. There was tolerance. This also was the case in the Balkans. In my view, everything was well administered. But the Ottoman system became out of date, it fell behind the times.

Turkey can play an important role in the region by being an example of a democratic republic. It has successfully realized its 15th free and fair elections. Turkey's democratic institutions, such as a freely elected parliament, are good examples for the region. To better serve as an example, Turkey should improve its own institutions of justice, human rights, and their market economy. For instance, Middle Eastern countries could adopt Turkey's example easier than France's because geographically and historically Turkey is situated closer to them in the region. As I mentioned before, although there is animosity they still feel closer to Turkey. Turkey should not interfere in their internal problems, but rather lead them, advise them when help is needed to avoid any kind of war in the region.

TPQ: How does Turkey's progress towards joining the European Union effect its relations with the Middle East? Would relations between East and West improve globally? Would Turkey be more distant from the Middle East? If Turkey is accepted into the EU would this have a strengthening effect on Europe's power in the Middle East? How would the dynamics change?

Demirel: Perspectives of Turkey in the Arab world and Europe differ significantly. If I were to generalize, I would say, the Arab world's point of view is more

shallow. They really do not know what the EU is and what its aims are. I am also convinced that Turks, or even most Europeans, do not know what the EU means. Nevertheless, we cannot expect everyone to know the issue thoroughly. However, there are some facts about the EU known and recognized as successes. For example, all European countries are rich and developed in every aspect. Development is illustrated by discoveries and inventions realized in Europe. They have been inventing for the benefits of humanity. Of course we envy them. This does not mean one has to be a Christian to be successful in these fields. People keep thinking Islam is the barrier to all these inventions and discoveries. Turkey is also a developing Muslim country. It will be prestigious for Turkey to become a member of the EU. When this happens and Turkey catches up with the civilization and the modernity of Europe, people in the Middle East will consider this a great success. Turkey's integration to the EU will have a positive influence on the Greater Middle East project. As a result, if the U.S. wants to be successful in this project, they should strongly support Turkey in every aspect during the process of joining the EU as they have done. A more powerful and more esteemed Turkey could play an important role in establishing peace in the region. If Turkey had never applied for EU membership, it would not have been an issue of credibility. However, being refused after 41 years of trying will harm Turkey's image not only in the Middle East but also, in the Caucasus, the Balkans and Central Asia. In any case, not being an EU member will certainly not be the end of the world.

I recently attended an important meeting in the Balkans and I found out that Balkan countries are getting closer to Europe. In fact, the problem in Kosovo still exists. They do not know yet whether Serbia and Montenegro shall unite or depart. Slovenia and Croatia have reached the level of 10,000 USD per capita income. Macedonia and Bulgaria are improving. These improvements in the Balkans will have a good effect on Turkey. Turkey's presence is also a great help to them. Turkey had always been in the Balkans and will always be culturewise, diasporawise and credibilitywise.

TPQ: If future EU membership is not pronounced as a possibility for the western Balkan countries, do you think the region is under the risk of investments in defense rather than investments in institutional change?

Demirel: If there is no peace between these countries they will not prosper. If the EU does not include them in its structure, conditions will not get better for these countries. If Europe wants to be an undivided, democratic, peaceful and wealthy entity, the Balkans should be integrated into the EU. I mean all the Balkan countries including Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Moldavia and Turkey. If not, then the EU will have not united the entire Europe.

TPQ: What is the cost of the current tensions in the Israel-U.S.-Turkey alliance?

That is to say, does the current situation weaken Turkey's position in the Middle East region?

Demirel: We know that Turkey's existence does not depend on this alliance. Even if Turkey's relations with this alliance get into trouble, Turkey will be there. Nevertheless, it seems that Turkey receives great benefits from having good relations in this alliance. These relations all depend on reciprocal benefits. It is very rare to find this kind of commonly shared interests by two countries. The counterpart could also be Brazil. Why not? But this is not the case. The U.S. has clear interests in this region. That is why it built up strong relations with Turkey. Turkey has also profited from America's power for many years. Such mutual interest is not easy to find. You may not be able to continue such relationships based on joint interests between countries at the same high level for very long. Conditions might change. Mutual advantages may not coincide. Then a new pattern may develop according to these needs and for the sake of good relationships.

We should not risk our relations with the U.S. for simple reasons. There is still the ground for close relations with the U.S. There is no decrease in America's interest in the region. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a new geopolitical map emerged. On this geopolitical map there are four important regions; the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia. Turkey has leverage in all of these regions. As a matter of fact, the U.S. needs Turkey in this region, not only as an ally, but to be able to keep peace in the world. They need us for tomorrow's world order because in the future, the main powers will be China, India, the Russian Federation, Japan, the EU and the United States. This is a power-game and the United States needs an ally in this power-game to be able to keep its superpower status. It is not very easy for America to find a friendly ally like Turkey in the region. Who else could be a better ally? Russia? Iran? Armenia? So, a close relationship between America and Turkey is a must because of geographical conditions, for historical reasons, and in light of future world politics.

Israel is a laboratory for democracy, wealth and economic development. Their power in the world economy can not be underestimated. They have built up a strong economy in a region where other peoples live mostly in poverty. They have always used the most advanced technology. We have to benefit from the experience of this country. We all know that Israel's role in the world is very important today, as if it were not a country with more than a mere five million inhabitants. They have power worldwide.

Relations between Israel and Turkey have never harmed the Arab world. Turkey is careful enough not to conduct bilateral relations with its neighbors to harm third parties. The United States's political and economic influence over Israel and Israel's political and economic influence over the U.S. is obvious. If ever a peace agreement is reached between Palestine and Israel, it will be very useful for regional collaboration and global peace.

TPQ: I think you meant recent steps taken by Turkey regarding Syria when you said “we should not risk our relations with the U.S. for simple reasons.” What do you think about Turkey’s recent policies regarding Syria? Also, what are your views about the threat posed by potential Iranian nuclear weapons and Turkey’s policy with this regard?

Demirel: I did not mean Syria when I mentioned “simple problems.” I believe the voting on 1 March 2003 on whether to allow the U.S. to use Turkey as a staging ground for their war on Iraq was conducted incorrectly. We did not play our role successfully and neither did America. There should have been a better solution. If the result was going to be negative, the proposal should not have been taken to the Parliament. You cannot go ahead and say “We have democracy in our country so we went and asked our parliament.” This can never be an excuse. It is not as if Turkey is the only democracy in the world. There is a way to deal with such situations. If you have a one party government, you cannot simply say “this is the majority’s will.” What you should have done is, to hold a meeting with your parliamentary group before the vote and decide then to vote for the resolution. Only then may you blame the parliament if the result is different than what you had decided. As a matter of fact, parliaments do not rule governments. On the contrary, governments rule parliaments. Governments bring decisions before parliaments and if the parliament does not agree with government’s decisions then there is one step to be taken, which is to resign. All the steps taken in this case were wrong.

America was very impatient during this process. If they had measured Turkey’s public opinion more carefully, they would have known how hard it was for Turkey to take an active role in this war. The war was planned to be against Saddam but then they changed the target to Iraq. It is very well known that some Turkish citizens share the same ethnicity with the people of Northern Iraq and in fact the entire Iraq. These people are from Kurdish, Turkoman and Arab origin, as are most of the people in the southeast region of Turkey. In some parts of Turkey people speak Arabic. We have citizens of Arab origin as well. Is it right, in those circumstances, for these two countries to fight against each other? This should have been calculated. This situation was handled incompetently. The U.S. should have listened more carefully to what our politicians were telling them. The U.S. should not have accepted that the Turkish parliamentarians put reservations such as “if the parliament accepts” Vague statements that imply a wait-and-see-situation should not have been accommodated.

Our government gave the impression that they were committed to pass the March 1st resolution. Otherwise why would they have passed the first resolution which involved the logistic preparations for military action through Turkish soil?

There should not have been commitments and promises which were ambiguous. Both sides failed in their management of the situation. These are important

relations which should not be harmed by such mistakes. Establishing such relationships takes time and a lot of effort. Both sides should have valued their relationship and acted accordingly. The essence of the relationship should not have been allowed to deteriorate because of such frictions.

The claim of “what can we do, we are a democracy” is groundless. In democratic countries, there are many means of information circulation. Governments, political parties, politicians should have used all the existing information instruments to explain every action to be taken and to inform the whole world of its benefits. These efforts would not be for the sake of American interests, they would be for Turkey’s own interests. The prestige of Turkey as a country on bad terms with the U.S. is much less than if Turkey is on good terms with the U.S. with its dignity intact. Obviously the second option is more in Turkey’s interests. The administration of the state cannot be surrendered to the anger of the people on the street. Those who run the country from time to time need to stand up to the people and explain what the truths are, even if they are going to be stoned for it by men on the street. I am completely against how this issue was managed.

In the past, relations were almost damaged by the Cyprus problem. Though we held our ground about the American embargo being wrong, we did not fail to pursue Turkey’s interests. We actively defined how Turkish-American relations should be.

Recently a positive step was taken in the visit of our prime minister to the United States. Yet it did not solve all the problems - because while we claimed we wanted to smooth Turkish-US relations we created serious tension over Syria. This was very wrong. No one asked Turkey to become Syria’s enemy on behalf of America. But Turkey could have avoided acts that blatantly disturbed the U.S. This would not have bothered Syria. Turkey does not have any commitments to Syria. Relations with both the US and Syria could have been managed without creating problems. Syria is our neighbor and an important country but it has significant problems. Turkey’s foreign policy should be conducted in balance, nothing should be overdone.

About Iran, I should start by mentioning that it is a big country. I really don’t believe that Iran will take any steps that would endanger world peace. Although they have had problems with the U.S., Iran has good relations with many countries of the West. They know better than anybody else that if they develop and use nuclear weapons this will be the end of their own country. Iran is governed by the Mollas. These Mollas are political leaders as well, when things reach the point where they are threatened, wisdom will dissuade them from any hostile action. I know Rafsanjani personally and if Rafsanjani were to rule the country, he would get closer to the West. Whoever is elected, Iran will never betray its own interests. They will never go to extremes. Iran is wise enough not to harm its own livelihood.

TPQ: Do you think it is better in Iran not to strengthen the opposition but leave the regime to change itself gradually?

Demirel: We should leave this regime change to the ways of the world. Iranians will discover themselves while watching the world change. They will evaluate the standards of the world and where they stand. By then, Turkey should be a perfect example for them. The Shah used to watch Turkey very carefully. In many ways Turkey could be the best model for their democracy. They should follow Turkey as Turkey follows the West for standards. Turkey will never approve of Iran's desire to be a nuclear power. Naturally, in that case, Turkey will not agree with Iran and Turkey will join other countries which do not agree as well. Iran has to think about this. Turkey has not had war with Iran for 360 years, since the "Qasr-i Shirin" agreement. I have told to the Americans, Iran is not like Iraq, so do not try to plan a war in Iran, it will be harder to beat them. □

TPQ: In Turkey, the state has control over religion to a certain extent. This was also the case in a different way during the Ottoman Empire. Do you think this practice will be a model for Middle East countries as well? How will America handle the issue of state-religion relationship in the Middle East?

Demirel: There are different religious sects and orders in Islam. None of the Sunni Muslim countries accepts Shi'a as a sect, but Shi'a people consider themselves Muslims. This is very normal because Islamic thinkers welcomed any human being who turns to the direction of Mecca and confesses that he or she is a Muslim. Nobody can consider such a human being as an infidel or heretic. In the past, there had been discussions on whether to consider Iranians Muslims, but today this is not subject to any political or religious discussion. There have been important wars between Shi'a Iran and the Ottomans. One of the reasons for these wars was whether Baghdad should be included within the borders of Iran or the Ottoman Empire.

There is no hierarchy in Sunni sects like in the Christian Church; but there is in the Shi'a. According to our belief religion is between God and the believer. The prayer leaders are only there to show ways to reach God, but they are not allowed to rule us. Even the prophets cannot stand between God and a human being. The state only finances the Directorate of Religious Affairs and does not interfere with the application of beliefs. It would be against secularism if the state interfered. In the past, we have had some cases where politicians sought support on the basis of the religious beliefs of the people; but it backfired. As far as I am concerned, every country should adopt the way which fits its structure.

TPQ: What is your opinion on the future of the Turkic Republics? After the Azeri elections are held in November, do you think will there be any changes? Some opposition movements seem to be getting support from abroad...

Demirel: Can the republics founded after the disintegration of the Soviet Union such as Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan in the Caucasus and Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and somewhat Afghanistan in Central Asia remain independent? This is the most important issue. These countries were strongly tied to the Soviet system. When the system collapsed it has not been easy for them to move towards both democracy and market economy. They did not have the institutions or the human resources for the simultaneous political and economic transformation. They had no choice but to utilize the individuals who have experience in the past communist administration. Actually, no former Soviet country has been able to fully complete this transformation, including Russia and Ukraine. Who is governing the Russian Federation? They are still 104 nations, 16 million square kilometers of land, and 145 million people, a big number of autonomous administrations. Who is coordinating them, really? I think there is a problem.

Now when we turn back to the independent Republics, it is important that they stay on their feet. For years America said it was more important that they be stable than democratic. Now America announces that they cannot sacrifice democracy for stabilization. President Bush's speech during his visit to the Baltic Republics is very interesting in this sense. Taliban could have swept away Central Asian countries. They didn't permit this. However, the same great powers allowed the government to fall in Kyrgyzstan. They may have even encouraged the situation. We do not know what kind of a process Uzbekistan will undergo. For some time not much will change in Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan is softer and their leader is more democratic and has developed better relations with the world.

When we look at Caucasus, Armenia is on its way to disintegration. The population has decreased by half due to their animosity against Turkey. We all know what happened in Georgia. No matter how much effort is expended, I do not expect a lot of trouble in Azerbaijan.

The stabilization of these countries will always help to protect Turkey's benefits in the region. Turkey helped them a lot during their transformation period. Turkey started an education program which helped them educate 15,000 students who will form the future governing elite of these countries. These republics have their own economic means to survive if they are well governed. They need time. It is wrong to start internal conflicts in these countries in the name of democratization. Of course no concessions should be made from the path to democracy, but internal conflicts should not be the means for change.

TPQ: Is there a sharp distinction between American and Turkish policy in their approaches to preserving versus challenging status quo in the region? □

Demirel: Turkey wants no bloodshed while establishing democracy but we do not say that democracy should be sacrificed for stability. We ask a way to be

found to have both democratization and maintain stability. Democracy cannot come about overnight. Steps towards democracy need to be consistent. Turkey says creating complications within countries should be avoided.

TPQ: Do you think Turkey has a consistent foreign policy? □

Demirel: Turkey's foreign policy is in the hands of experienced staff. The foreign ministry staff is well endowed. Of course the state and the political leadership will provide a certain amount of steering but for the most part the foreign policy staff will prevent important mistakes from being made. There are valuable diplomats both at the headquarters and abroad. Turkey should rely on them; they are one of Turkey's most important strengths.