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Special Report

Turkey Now Escalating its Moves Toward the Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons

Analysis. By Gregory R. Copley, Editor, GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs. A debate is now gaining momentum within senior circles of the governing *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party: AKP) in Turkey as to whether or not this is the time to proceed rapidly with the development and acquisition of nuclear weapons, so that Turkey maintains strategic parity with other nuclear powers in the region: Russia, Israel, Pakistan, and Iran. Highly-placed sources indicate that Turkey has been deliberating the acquisition of military nuclear capability for some time, but has been constrained by its need to maintain good relations with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO) partners generally, as well as the European Union (EU). The Turkish General Staff (*Genelkurmay Başkanları: GB*) is also engaged in this debate, but, for the most part, this is a debate dominated by the civilian leadership.

Turkish acquisition of nuclear weapons would significantly transform the balance of power and the strategic dynamic of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Greater Black Sea Basin (GBSB), and the Caucasus, and would be the cornerstone of Turkey's ambitious program to restore what it sees as its historical pan-Turkist mission. Indeed, without nuclear weapons — at least as far as regional perception is concerned — Turkey could not compete against a nuclear Iran or be seen as an independent “great power” in the region.

Nuclear weapons research has long been underway, under conditions of extreme secrecy, in Turkey, and the AKP leadership is aware that it is probable that this will become public knowledge as the effort becomes more intense. It is not totally dependent on, but benefits from, the acquisition by Turkey of uranium-based nuclear power reactors, which will ultimately provide a base of fissionable materials to sustain an indigenous nuclear weapons program. Meanwhile, however, nuclear weapons research — which requires only a minimal amount of fissionable material, obtainable on the world market — can continue separately. There is no doubt that Turkey's growing relationships with Iran, Brazil, and Pakistan have been — as far as the Turkish leadership is concerned — with the military nuclear program partially in mind.

As far back as 1998, Turkish media reports indicated that then-Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had offered Turkey cooperation in the development of nuclear weapons.¹ [Significantly, Nawaz Sharif is poised to make a political comeback in Pakistan in the next general elections.] The dramatic lowering of leverage which the US and EU have over Turkish strategic direction over the past 18 months, coupled with the growing separation with Israel at the behest of the AKP as a means of reducing the domestic Turkish political influence of the General Staff, along with the perceived need to firmly establish a stronger measure of Turkish independence from Russia, are all contributory factors in the Turkish Government's moves to press ahead as rapidly as possible with the nuclear weapons and nuclear power programs.

What is significant is that Turkey played a significant rôle in the early 1980s in helping Pakistan acquire systems for the development of the Pakistani nuclear weapons program, and there is little doubt that Turkey now expects a *quid pro quo*. Pakistan, despite ill-informed Western media speculation, has been extremely cautious about sharing its nuclear weapons knowledge, and may not deliver what Ankara wants with regard to nuclear cooperation at this point. Nonetheless, the growing military supply relationship between Turkey and Pakistan highlights the quiet cooperation between the two former

Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) member states, and now Turkey and Iran (another former CENTO member) have cautiously come back together under the aegis of the Russian regional energy networking. In 1992, US Senator John Glenn and other US congressmen accused Turkey of supplying sensitive technology to Pakistan in order to aid in Pakistan's acquisition of uranium enrichment technology.

The Turkish Government has been careful about moving ahead with independent nuclear weapons capabilities until this point because such a move could have precipitated a cut-off of Turkey from the US and EU economies and its position within NATO. Now, however, Turkey is reaching a junction point where Turkish membership of the EU is seen by many in the Turkish Government as no longer feasible or desirable and the AKP is beginning to feel as though it has the General Staff (GB) more or less under control and not in a position to challenge or overthrow the civilian Islamist Government. On the other hand, Russia — which more or less took off the velvet gloves with Turkey in early 2009 to bring Ankara within the Russian strategic orbit² — is not in a strong position to stop Turkey moving ahead with its nuclear weapons program, just as it has been unable to stop Iran in its process of acquiring externally-built nuclear weapons and developing its own nuclear weapons production capabilities.

Very senior sources in Israel, Russia, and the US have privately expressed concern that Turkey is proceeding with its nuclear weapons program, and that Turkey has obtained a significant knowledge of nuclear weapons technology, protocols, and operational doctrine from its association with NATO and Israel. Moreover, officials in Israel, Russia, and the US are fully aware that neither the Turkish Government nor the Turkish military pays any attention to confidentiality clauses, end user certificates, or use strictures on weapons, intelligence, or defense systems made available to Turkey by its allies. One Israeli official told GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs*: “We are all fully aware that when the Turkish Armed Forces invaded Cyprus in 1974 they did so using US military equipment in defiance of the use strictures placed on that equipment when it was provided by the US to Turkey. Today, Turkey is in open violation of all of its agreements with the US and Israel with regard to the US and Israeli military systems which are the backbone of the Turkish Armed Forces now occupying Northern Cyprus.” This was the first disclosure that Israeli military equipment was being used by the Turkish military in Cyprus, and that this was a violation of understandings between Turkey and Israel when the equipment was supplied.

The Turkish Armed Forces have long worked with the US military on the use of nuclear weapons, particularly artillery-launched, air-delivered, and theater-level ballistic missile-delivered nuclear warheads and bombs. US nuclear weapons are still based in Turkey. On November 23, 2009, the US left-leaning Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists — an anti-nuclear organization — published a report by Alexandra Bell and Benjamin Loehrke. stating: “Turkey hosts an estimated 90 B61 [nuclear] gravity bombs at Incirlik Air Base. Fifty of these bombs are reportedly assigned for delivery by US pilots, and 40 are assigned for delivery by the Turkish Air Force. However, no permanent nuclear-capable US fighter wing is based at Incirlik, and the Turkish Air Force is reportedly not certified for NATO nuclear missions, meaning nuclear-capable F-16s from other US bases would need to be brought in if Turkey's bombs were ever needed.”

Turkish analyst and author Mehmet Kalyoncu, writing on September 19, 2008, in *Today's Zalman* website, noted: “Ankara is intensifying its lobbying in Western capitals, most notably in Washington, to get the green light to develop nuclear weapons. Ankara presents itself as the most viable nuclear power in the region to counterbalance the nuclear Iran, pointing out that the other likely candidates, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria, which lack democratic institutions, checks and balances and transparency, cannot be trusted with such military capabilities. Furthermore, Ankara is seeking to justify its quest for nuclear weapons by arguing that with or without the approval of its Western allies Turkey has to develop such capabilities because a nuclear Iran next to its border puts Turkish national security under threat. Accordingly, Ankara is seeking assistance from the major material and know-how suppliers, such as the United States, Canada, France, the United Kingdom and Israel. Finally, the United States tacitly approves Turkey's acquisition of nuclear weapon capabilities in order to both counterbalance a nuclear Iran in the Middle East and to prevent another rogue state in the region besides Iran from becoming a nuclear power. Consequently, the US is competing with the other suppliers to seize the lion share in Turkey's emerging nuclear market.”

Kalyoncu continued:

Any possible reluctance on the side of Turkey's Western allies to provide Turkey with the necessary material and know-how to develop nuclear weapons will encourage Ankara to

seek other possible partners, which are quite numerous, including Iran itself. The most likely scenarios and the alternative scenarios of Turkey acquiring nuclear weapons or the capability of building nuclear weapons differ from each other not in terms of Turkey's driving motivations but in terms of the acquisition process.

It is possible that the United States and the European Union will not give the green light to Turkey to acquire nuclear weapon capabilities, and will at the same time try to deter Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and/or another nuclear aspirant from acquiring or developing nuclear weapons. However, the two cannot succeed in doing so, as is the case with Iran. In addition, the US and the EU may not provide a credible and reliable guarantee to Turkey that they will protect Turkey against a nuclear threat. Actually, no such guarantee, including the NATO membership, may suffice to convince Turkey to stop its quest for nuclear weapon capabilities given the destructive capability of a nuclear attack and the fact that its very national security is at stake. Worried with the risk of remaining weak and vulnerable in its region and being threatened by a rogue nuclear power, Turkey would then seek nuclear weapon capabilities, risking confrontation with both the United States and the European Union. After all, then the domestic public opinion wouldn't just condone Turkey acquiring nuclear weapons, but demand it from the government.

Given that Turkey's Western allies do not condone Turkey becoming a nuclear power, Ankara is forced to seek non-Western partners and suppliers for its nuclear program. Turkey does not have difficulty in finding them. Actually, most likely, they would find Turkey anyway. Respectively, Pakistan, Russia, Israel and finally Iran are among the possible partners in Turkey's nuclear endeavor. Historically, Pakistan has always been supportive of the idea of Turkey becoming a nuclear power. Islamabad first approached Ankara to offer Pakistan's assistance to Turkey in developing nuclear weapons during the rule of Gen. Zia ul-Haq in the 1960s and then during the rule of Nawaz Sharif in the late 1990s. However, Ankara had to disregard both offers because of concerns about alienating its Western allies. However, under the current circumstances, the national security threat Turkey faces and the Western allies' refusal to address Turkey's concerns make it imperative for Ankara to seek Pakistan's help in developing a nuclear weapons program.

Once Turkey comes out as a possible buyer of nuclear material and technology, Israel, Turkey's long-time ally in the Middle East, would also want to help Turkey by selling it the necessary material, equipment and know-how. Similarly, Russia is likely to reap the benefits of this emerging market for its nuclear technology before the US or the EU does. Finally, though reluctantly, Tehran would also be willing to assist Ankara, calculating that Turkey's becoming a nuclear power would only further legitimize Iran having nuclear weapons, even if it would eliminate Iran's chances of becoming the sole regional leader.

It now seems clear that the AKP Government feels that the Turkish population would be ready to support a move toward nuclear weapons even at the expense of finally ending the Turkish entry process into the EU. However, it is by no means certain that the EU entry process would be formally stopped — even though it has become totally academic at this point, in any event — even if Turkey went ahead with an open nuclear program. What seems more likely, however, is that the Turkish Government will continue to deny its nuclear weapons program for as long as possible; indeed, until testing or deployment, even if the reality becomes obvious. After all, it fully understands how Israel operates in this regard: the Israeli Government will still not confirm the presence of a nuclear weapons capability in the Israel Defense Force (IDF), almost a half-century after Israel acquired military nuclear capabilities.

There has been no response from sources in the Hellenic Defense Forces as to a reaction by Greece to the acquisition by Turkey of nuclear weapons, but the emergence of the realization that Turkey is now moving in this direction would further spur Greece to boost its strategic relations with Israel (Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou visited Israel on July 21, 2010, the first visit by a Greek Prime Minister since Konstantinos Mitsotakis visited in 1992). This process is now underway.

One of the major areas for the international trade in illicit nuclear materials — both technologies and fissionable material — has been Croatia and the Albanian (particularly Kosovo Albanian) mafia. Most of

this trade has involved systems and matériel from the former Soviet Union. Turkey's strenuous and discreet program of support for the Kosovo Albanians, the Islamists in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Croats in their wars of the 1990s against the Serbs, should now be seen, also, in the light of the nuclear ambitions of Turkey as well as in the light of its attempts to restore dominion over the former Ottoman sphere in the Balkans.³

The Turkish moves to resume influence in the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, the Horn of Africa, and the Maghreb are also part of the new Turkish strategic dynamic. Already, Turkish officials have felt that they could resume influence in administering conflict resolution issues in the Horn of Africa, and the presence of Turkish officials and actions in Somalia are now overt. Ankara also recently hosted a major conference on Horn of Africa issues, even though Ottoman influence in the region have largely been forgotten by all but the Turks.

Overall, Turkish strategic initiatives have been designed, *à priori*, to give the Islamist AKP absolute control at home, reducing the military to a pre-republic (ie: Ottoman) status in Turkey, but also to challenge the other "great powers", including Russia, the US, the UK, and France, as well as to the regional authority of the Iranians, Egyptians, and Israelis. There is some belief in Ankara that this "window of opportunity" provided by US powerlessness and EU confusion will not be open long, and that Ankara must act on all its strategic initiatives even before the Russians can assert dominance over the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, Ankara is moving rapidly, perhaps to the point of recklessness. Absent a coherent response from the EU, the US, and particularly from a distracted Greece, Turkey may well attempt to further entrench itself in Cyprus, quite apart from making strenuous claims elsewhere in the region.

Footnotes:

1. See: Zeyrek, Deniz: "Pakistan's Offer for Cooperation", in *Radical*, June 1, 1998. The article noted: "It is reported that Nawaz Sharif made this offer personally to [Turkish] President Suleyman Demirel and to the Minister with him." Meanwhile, on May 17, 1998, Turkish television channel NTV, interviewing retired Turkish Air Force Lt.-Gen. Erdogan Oznal, who was formerly in charge of the Balikesir NATO Air Base, emphasized the nuclear threat from Israel, Pakistan, and Iran, and said: "Turkey must now develop its own nuclear [weapons] policy."
 2. See, for example, "Turkey Makes its Strategic Choice: Russia", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, March 3, 2009. and "Turkey's Strategic Options Shift as the Country Becomes Increasing Isolated", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, February 27, 2009.
 3. Quite apart from the fact that large numbers of ex-Soviet nuclear warheads or bombs have not been accounted for, a report dated August 16, 2004, in *Consumer Awareness* website noted: "The beleaguered Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is unable to account for 765 kilograms of plutonium — enough to make 150 nuclear weapons — according to a letter from nuclear watchdog groups to LANL Director G. Peter Nanos. According to the letter, 'The Department of Energy (DOE) reported a discharge to waste from LANL of 610 kilograms of plutonium; Los Alamos indicates a figure of 1,375 kilograms . . . a discrepancy of 765 kilograms, the equivalent of 150 nuclear weapons. This is unacceptable by any imaginable standards and constitutes a crucial safety, environmental, and security issue.'"
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