

## **The Weight of Islam in the Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans**

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The Balkans are perceived, by the Balkan people themselves, as an area of confrontation between Islam and Christianity. Could this perception push Turkey toward its fellow Muslims? Turkey is indeed naturally inclined to defend the interests of those with whom it shares a close cultural identity, itself the result of a long common shared history, and simply with those who welcome its influence or its support in the area. The historical role played by Turkey and its geographical proximity could establish this country as pole of attraction for the Muslims in the Balkans. Turkey could therefore see in Islam a tool for easing its penetration into this area. But, is this tool appropriate? In other words, is there among the Muslims in the Balkans a feeling of belonging to a common community and does Turkey have an influence on these Muslims?

### ***Turkish and Muslim communities in the Balkans: is there a community ?***

Each of these communities (Albanians, Turks in Bulgaria and in Greek Thrace, Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pomaks, etc.) has kept their own ethnic characteristics (language, folklore); in some cases, these communities are not even homogeneous. Apart from cases where two separate Muslim minorities are isolated in a vast area of Christianity (Turks and Pomaks in the Rhodope Mountains, Albanians and Turks in Macedonia), these Muslim communities have very few contacts with each other.

As for Turkey, since the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, it has not seemed concerned by the fate of these Muslims, being geographically cut off from some of them, and of different ethnic origin from others. Only the “revival process” in Bulgaria (1984-

85) motivated a strong reaction of the leaders and the press, and had important repercussions on the bilateral relations. As for the interest shown for the Turks in Greek Thrace, it should be seen in the frame of the tensions between Greece and Turkey. And even the support Turkey extended to the Turks in Cyprus replies to considerations more strategic than fraternal. Turkey did extend its support to the persecuted Turks in Bulgaria and opened its doors to massive emigration in 1989 (around 320,000 people). But after a few months, it closed its borders (august 1989). Later, the Erbakan government even proposed to expel the Bulgarian Turks back to their "homeland".<sup>1</sup> Turkey was reluctant to finance the Turkish schools in this country (it is only during the summer of 1998 after the Bulgarians had threatened to close down these schools that an agreement was signed on the matter), and Turkish investments in the areas inhabited by Turks, although badly needed and promised as soon as 1991-92, have remained poor.

The persecutions that the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina suffered could only, of course, prompt the scandalized reaction of the other Muslims in the Balkans and in Turkey, who saw their fellow Muslims massacred precisely because of their religion. Moreover, the more these communities are isolated in threatening surroundings, the more they will welcome external support. But the Muslims of the Balkans did not rush to help their Bosnian brothers. In Turkey, the war in Bosnia was extensively commented on; journalists accused the West of applying a "double standard" and letting the Muslims be killed because they were Muslims. But in practice, the most vigorous reactions (calls for sending arms and volunteers for example) were confined to the nationalist and Islamic areas<sup>2</sup> and, on the ground, volunteers were rather rare. The demonstration organized in Taksim Square in Istanbul on February 1993 gathered merely 20,000 people, mainly Islamists. At the same time, Greece gathered one million people in Athens in demonstrations on the Macedonian question. The solidarity with the Slavic Muslims in Bosnia, although based on true feeling of sympathy in the Turkish population, was expressed essentially with symbolic actions (allocation of rooms in a hospital, various

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<sup>1</sup> *Milliyet*, February 22, 1997, March 20, 1997; OMRI Daily Digest, February 24, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> The daily newspaper *Türkiye* and the television channel *TGRT*, of nationalist and Islamist leanings, were at the forefront of this campaign. They of course denounced the "double standards" but were as well prompt to describe the massacres committed by the Serbs and exhorted the Turks to go fight alongside the Muslims in Bosnia

supplies sent by the Turkish Red Cross, etc.). The conflict in Bosnia was in fact mainly used by the Islamist party, the *Refah Partisi*, to feed its own rhetoric concerning the perversity of Western world. It allowed it as well to demonstrate its determination (by opposition to the passive attitude of the government) to help these "persecuted brothers".<sup>3</sup>

As for the Turks of Bosnian origin, they did not really mobilize around the Bosnian/Muslim cause. This group represents of non-negligible fraction of the Turkish population (probably around two million people, according to various estimates). However, the Bosnian Turks settled in Turkey a long time ago. They have been Turkicized and therefore no longer have very close links to their country of origin. They mainly extended help to the Bosnian refugees in Turkey (around 20,000 people according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees).<sup>4</sup>

The only real policy of solidarity toward these Muslim and/or Turkish communities in the Balkans – and it had a noticeable cost for Turkey – is a policy of accepting refugees. Turks from Bulgaria in 1950-51, Albanians and Turks from Yugoslavia in the 50's, more recently from Bulgaria (1989), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992 and after), Kosovo (1999), these people (expelled or voluntary migrating) were accepted without almost no restrictions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> However, revelations in 1994 that the funds collected by the *Refah* for the Muslims in Bosnia were used to finance its electoral campaign, have cast doubts on the sincerity of its brotherhood drive and have damaged the reputation of this political party which polishes its "clean" image.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the research made by Belkıs Kümbetoğlu of the Pendik area of Istanbul, "Göçmen ve Sığınmacı Gruplardan Bir Kesit : Bulgaristan göçmenleri ve Bosnalı Sığınmacılar", in Kemâlî Saybaşı, Gencer Özcan (ed.), *Yeni Balkanlar, Eski Sorunlar*, Istanbul, Bağlam, 1997, pp. 227-259.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Cevat Geray, *Türkiye'den ve Türkiye'ye göçmenlerin iskanı (1923-1961)*, Ankara, Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yay., 1962; Kemal Kirişçi, "Post-Second World War Immigration from the Balkan Countries to Turkey", *New Perspective on Turkey*, n°12, printemps 1995, pp. 61-77; Halit Eren, "Balkanlarda Türk ve diğer müsülman toplumları ve göç olgusu", *Balkanlar*, Istanbul, Eren, pp. 289-299; Darina Vasileva, "Bulgarian Turkish Emigration and Return", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 26, n°2, été 1992, pp. 342-352.

### ***The preeminence of political over religious dimension***

As for official reactions to the conflict in Bosnia, Turkey exerted, during a first phase, intense diplomatic pressure on the international community by launching initiatives anytime it could in the international organizations to which Turkey belongs (NATO, OSCE, UN, Organization of the Islamic Conference). Turkish leaders insisted mainly on two points: first, the lifting of the arms embargo, which, according to Turkey, was depriving the Muslim side of supplies, while the Serbs could largely rely on the Federal army's stock. Second, Turkish leaders insisted on the implementation of the decisions of the United Nations, even if this meant a military intervention. Turkey voiced as well its opposition to the Vance-Owen peace plan, on the grounds that it legitimized the seizure of territories by the Serbs. After this plan was proposed, disillusion with the Western reaction grew, and Turkey entered a phase of rather scattered initiatives for Bosnia. At the same time, the death of the President Turgut Özal created a political crisis which has only deepened ever since. The attention of the government has been monopolized by these internal problems, newly exacerbated tensions with Russia, and the Armenian offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>6</sup>

Conflict in Bosnia has mainly been a theme exploitable—and profitable—during electoral campaigns.<sup>7</sup> Tansu Çiller, former Prime Minister, went twice to Sarajevo: in February 1994, a few weeks before local elections, and in November 1995, again four weeks before elections. These trips were certainly aimed at expressing the support of Turkey for the Muslim community, but as well at restoring a rather tarnished image before elections. It was as well thought important not to leave Necmettin Erbakan, president of the *Refah*, with the "monopoly of indignation", and therefore the government had to compete with the *Refah* in terms of condemnations of the massacres, criticism of the United Nations, and so on. But beyond this rhetorical strategy, the government was very cautious. The options for Turkey were limited. It could act only in

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<sup>6</sup> On these different phases of the Turkish actions and reactions to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, see Philip Robins, "Coping with Chaos: Turkey and the Bosnian Crisis", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 1, 1994, pp. 104-129; Sylvie Gangloff, "La Turquie face à son passé ottoman : la diplomatie balkanique de la Turquie", in Xavier Bougarel (dir.), *Les dimensions islamiques de la crise dans les Balkans*, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> And there is a tendency to overestimate the influence of Turkey on the (positive) course of the conflict. For example: "Bosna'da Türk askerleri kilit rolde", *Hürriyet*, July 29, 1995.

accordance with the West and unilateral action was not possible or even wished for (in political or even financial terms). Finally, it should not be forgotten that Turkey and Turkey's initiatives were carefully watched by the other Balkan countries, suspicious of its real intentions – and prompt to denounce any move on its part. On another side, Turkey was as well observed by countries in Central Asia, who were evaluating its true political weight. In this context, Turkey could not look unconcerned – and especially less concerned than Iran – and so multiplied the condemnation of double standards, etc. but, on the ground, remained in the background and intervened only in the frame of international initiatives.

The promotion of Islam remained in tandem with political options. Indeed, Ankara and Tirana underscored their "common culture", but this was only in support of a political rapprochement. As for the leaders of the Muslim community in Bosnia, they looked to Turkey only when they were in a difficult situation. The Panislamism promoted by these leaders was in any case not compatible with Turkish secularism.<sup>8</sup> On the whole, Islam has been invoked only to justify or reinforce a pre-existing political decision and it has covered political and not religious common interests. Turkish leaders did not hesitate to quickly renew the relations with the "Serbian aggressors" after the Dayton agreement. Turkish businessmen, including the members of the MÜSIAD, hastened to invest in this country and the agreements regulating trade between the two nations were rapidly concluded. Bosnia does not seem to receive the same attention. In 1997, bilateral trade did not exceed \$25 million.<sup>9</sup> Very early on, Turkey extended a credit line of \$100 million to Croatia and Romania. Bosnia, devastated by the war, was not promised more than \$80 million (and only \$29 million have so far been given).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> And finally, the relations between Muslim Bosnian leaders and Turkish leaders were never excellent. Recently, in February 2000, these Bosnian leaders took some steps to establish relations with the (Greek) Republic of Cyprus, which provoked, of course, a scandalized reaction in Turkey. See *Hürriyet*, February 26, 2000; Anadolu Ajansi, February 26, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Anadolu Ajansi, March 3, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Out of these 80 million, 20 million were transformed into a donation (announced by President Demirel during his trip to Bosnia in June 1996). The agreement on this economic aid package was signed during Deputy Prime Minister Ecevit's visit in August 1998. *Cumhuriyet*, January 22, 1998; Anadolu Ajansi, January 22, 1998, August 29 and 30, 1998 ; *Milliyet*, September 1, 1998.

### *The Kosovo case*

Another example of this preeminence of political over religious dimension is the official reaction of Turkey to the conflict in Kosovo. As for the war in Bosnia, it condemned the violence of the repression and proposed its participation in an international peace-keeping force, but, in contrast to its reaction toward the events in Bosnia, it did not display an intense diplomatic activism. Turkish leaders were in fact rather cautious in their denunciation of the violence of the repression and did not accuse the international community of passivity. Here again, national interest clearly prevails over religious solidarity. It is indeed hard to imagine Turkey supporting a movement of separatism (or one so perceived by the international community) when it is fighting a similar movement on its own territory. Actually, numerous scholars or politicians have not missed this analogy between Kosovo and Kurdistan (an ethnic minority, in majority in its own area, demanding rights or claiming independence). Therefore Turkey has not launched any diplomatic initiative of importance and, at most, has condemned the violence of the repression and has called for a constructive dialogue. Turkey, as the entire international community, is strongly committed to the preservation of the territorial integrity of the FRY. Turkish leaders are officially advocating the "restoration" (and not the granting!) of the rights of the Albanians.<sup>11</sup> Besides, they insist on the participation of the Turkish minority of Kosovo (12,000 people according to the 1989 census) in the talks. Belgrade subscribes fully to this request, which would allow it to break the Albanian unity of Kosovo.<sup>12</sup> During this first phase of hostilities between Albanians and Serbs before NATO strikes (from March 1998 to March 1999), most of the newspapers in Turkey praised the "realistic approach" of the government.<sup>13</sup> The independence of Kosovo was clearly rejected<sup>14</sup> and the "energetic action" of the international community even mentioned!<sup>15</sup> However, as opposed to the case of Bosnia,

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<sup>11</sup> Albanian Telegraphic Agency, July 15, 1998. By insisting on the restoration of the rights of the Albanians in Kosovo, the Turks avoid any unwelcome comparison with the Kurds (who have never had any rights in the past like the Albanians in Kosovo under the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution).

<sup>12</sup> For the same purpose, Belgrade had granted a lot of cultural rights to the Turks in the 60's. See C.N.O. Bartlett, "The Turkish Minority in Yugoslavia", *Bradford Studies on Yugoslavia*, n°3, 1980, pp. 1-15.

<sup>13</sup> Even the newspaper *Türkiye* covered this event in a rather dispassionate tone, but as usual the editorials were more vindictive.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, *Cumhuriyet*, March 13, 1998; *Milliyet*, July 8, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> *Milliyet*, March 11, 1998.

the Turks of Albanian origin, generally settled in Turkey in the 1950's, are mobilized and very active in their lobbying for the Kosovo cause.<sup>16</sup>

Two kinds of arguments had been put forward to reject the parallel with the situation in the southeast of Anatolia:

- The repression has been launched on such a large scale that there is no comparison possible. President Demirel even called this repression a "genocide".<sup>17</sup>
- The nature of the conflict is completely different. "They call them a minority in Kosovo but we don't have minorities in Turkey", declared Süleyman Demirel.<sup>18</sup>

The main preoccupation of Ankara is the risk of an extension of the Kosovo conflict to the entire peninsula, and here, "its" national interest is concerned. Turkey immediately strengthened its military assistance to the Republic of Macedonia<sup>19</sup>, where there is a large Albanian community with close links to the Kosovar Albanians, and which is, therefore, the weak point in the containment of the conflict to Kosovo. Since the beginning of March 1998, Turkey has proposed its participation in a peacekeeping force.

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<sup>16</sup> In December 1996, they inaugurated (without any official authorization) a representative office of the Republic of Kosovo in Istanbul. According to Kosovo Daily Report (December 26, 1996), Albania's ambassador to Turkey, the Minister of Information of the Republic of Kosovo and the vice-chairman of the Democratic League of Kosova participated in the ceremony. In May 1998, several associations set up a "Kosovo Information Commission". Anadolu Ajansi, May 11, 1998. However, if the leaders of this Albanian community in Istanbul are mobilized, according to the proper words of the leader of the Turkish-Albanian association, (*Türk-Arnavut Derneği*, based in Bayrampaşa), Halil Metin, the mobilization of the Turkish population of Albanian origin was rather disappointing. Interview with Halil Metin, August 29, 2000. Participation in the two demonstrations organized by the leaders of this community during the spring 1998 was as well quite low. The first demonstration (March 1998) gathered around 10 000 people according to the organizers, 2000 according to the official Turkish Press Agency (Anadolu Ajansi, March 9, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> *Hürriyet*, April 4, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Anadolu Ajansi, April 4, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> In June 1998, negotiations were engaged on the delivery of 20 F-5 planes to the Macedonian army and the training of Macedonian pilots in Turkey. In the previous weeks, NATO had organized a "demonstration of force" in Macedonia (the *Determined Falcon* maneuvers) and the Serbian air force had penetrated several times into the contested zone between the two countries.

### ***Turkophobia in the Balkans***

Beyond this rhetoric of religious fraternity and solidarity, invoked in well-chosen situations, Turkey can make use of the "Islamic" discourse only in moderation. First, its secularism and its aspiration to be recognized as a fully westernized country forbid it to raise the Muslim banner as soon as its political interests are concerned. In this respect, the manifestation of conflicts with religious connotations – Christians against Muslims – represents a challenge for Turkey. If it publicly takes the side of the Muslims, this can only reinforce its image of a Muslim state and therefore cut it off from Europe. During her visit to Sarajevo in February 1994, Tansu Çiller made no reference to Islam, held no talks with religious leaders and did not visit any place of worship.<sup>20</sup> Turkey opposed as well the attempts of Iran, within the Organization of the Islamic Conference, to describe this conflict as a religious war. When in July 1993, at the Islamabad meeting, seven countries of the OIC proposed to contribute 17,000 soldiers to a United Nations force, Turkey offered only about a hundred of men, whereas it declared being ready to contribute 5000 men to the UNPROFOR. After having pushed the other members of OIC to pressure the UN, it could not decently refuse to participate in this "Muslim force", but reduced its contribution to a minimum.

Second, Turkey's long domination of the Balkans sets it up as a suspicious actor in the eyes of most of the countries in the area. It was against the Ottoman Empire that Balkan people forged their independence. This phenomenon of "fundamental enmity" is not a particularity of the Balkans. What is however particular in this case is the inability of the Balkan people to overcome this enmity. The latter takes on in the Balkans the aspects of a struggle between Islam and Christianity, between civilization and obscurantism. The "Ottoman yoke" was endured with special pain as it was applied by "infidels", and this situation created confusion between Turks and Muslims. This overlapping of ethnicity, politics and religion, the role of scapegoat played by the Turks in the formation of the Balkan States, contributed to the "demonizing" of the Turks. They represent the oppressors of the Balkan people and are perceived as being tormented by an irresistible desire to expand toward the west and to conquer Christian lands.

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<sup>20</sup> *Le Monde*, February 4, 1994.

Constantly fed with literature, official historiography, various commemorations and politicians who find in the "bad Turk" a good way to justify the problems their countries face, this enmity is far from softening. Turcophobia is still particularly strong in Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia. According to a 1995 study, 89% of the Greeks declared having animosity toward the Turks.<sup>21</sup> The animosity covers all the social levels of the population and it leads Athens to conceive its foreign policy through this prism of the Turkish threat. Greek leaders constantly denounce the aggressive posture of Turkey. This fear is also based on a disproportion of military and demographic forces. Today inhabited by 10 million people, Greece see with fear Turkey counting a population of 60 million. Combined with this perception of the irredentism of Turkey, the Greeks live in fear this "cloud of Turks" will crash on them. In Bulgaria, where a sizable Turkish minority is still living, sociological studies show that most of the Bulgarians perceive the Turks as religious fanatics and think that they cannot be trusted.<sup>22</sup> The "revival process" (campaign of forced renaming the Turks launched in 1984-85) further deteriorated the relations between these two communities. Since 1990, the rights of this minority had been restored and the relations between Bulgaria and Turkey had improved steadily and markedly. However, the Bulgarians remain cautious and suspicious toward Turkey and the Turks in general. The leaders of the Movement of Rights and Freedoms, which represents the Turkish minority, have often been accused of working for Turkey (before the disclosure of the files of the former Bulgarian secret service!). The recent investments made by Turkish businesses in this country (in the process of privatization) are as well perceived (at least by some political classes) as a new danger.<sup>23</sup>

The Turkish military intervention in Cyprus in 1974 strengthens this perception of Turkey as an aggressive neighbor. It sustains another apprehension, the manipulation of a

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<sup>21</sup> Greek Helsinki Monitor, Press Release, May 19, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> See for example the investigation made in 1992 and published in *Sociologičeski Preleg*, n°3, 1993, pp. 54-81 (review by Kjell Engelbreck, "Bulgaria", *RFE/RL*, Vol. 3, n°16, April 22, 1994) ; and the studies published in *Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility Between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria*, Sofia, International center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, 1994.

<sup>23</sup> The official press agency of Turkey denounced the negative propaganda campaign carried out against the Turkish companies which are involved in significant investments in Bulgaria. Anadolu Ajansi, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999. See as well *Bulgarian Economic Review*, n°11, November 6, 1998.

fifth column (Turkish minorities in Greek Thrace and in Bulgaria). Indeed, whereas the Turks composed only 18% of the total population of Cyprus, Turkey did not hesitate to invade the island on the grounds that this minority was persecuted. What can be called the "Cyprus syndrome" is particularly wide-spread in Greece and Bulgaria, which have to deal with important Turkish minorities. Turkey is regularly accused by the Greeks and Bulgarians of using the Turkish minorities to pave the way of its irredentist policy. Since 1991, another fear has emerged in Greece: the "Islamic arc" (or "green transversal") stretching from Istanbul to Bosnia-Herzegovina through Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, the Sandžak and Kosovo, and cutting off Greece from its Balkan hinterland. The Greeks have been troubled by the rapprochement between Turkey and Bulgaria after 1992 and put it down to the pressure exercised by the Turkish minority, itself supposed to be under the influence of Turkey, on the course of Bulgaria's international relations. Turkey developed as well good relations with Albania and the "Republic of Skopje" where there is a sizable Muslim minority. Turkey is therefore accused of positioning itself as the protector of the Muslim minorities and relying on them to expand its political influence (and may be more) in the area. Pan-Turkism or Pan-Islamism ideas are equally mentioned and mixed in these denunciations, and Greece shares this fear with Serbia, and to some extent, with Bulgaria. And of course, the nomination of Necmettin Erbakan as Prime Minister in 1996 initiated a flurry of new fears of Islamization of the Balkans.

To face these "threats", the Orthodox Church and Orthodox rhetoric are mobilized. But, as in the case of "Muslim solidarity", Orthodox solidarity is contextual and complies with political trends. The arguments developed by the Serbian Orthodox Church during the Bosnian conflict were backed by the Greek and the Russian Orthodox Churches. The Orthodox Inter-Parliamentary Assembly set up in November 1994 under the sponsorship of Greece has no concrete effect and illustrates only a political axis between Greece and Russia, visible since mid-1993. Greece and Russia are the only permanent members of this assembly and their particular responsibility is stressed. The final declarations adopted following the meetings of this assembly formulated only one request, the lifting of the embargo against Serbia. But here again, this collective request masks common political and not religious aims. More than a "front of the Orthodox

countries", it should be seen as a "front of the countries who have suffered from the embargo against Serbia". But, indirectly, this Orthodox discourse nourishes the rhetoric of the Islamists (and others) in Turkey who, in turn, perceive the "Orthodox politics" of their neighbor as a threat. The Turkish press (mainly but not exclusively the newspaper *Türkiye*) has regularly echoed the attempts of Greece to create an Orthodox bloc with Russia, Armenia and Serbia (Bulgaria, Romania and Georgia have been mentioned, but less frequently)<sup>24</sup>. This apprehension is coupled with a fear of encirclement, revitalized since Russia and Greece made a deal on the deployment of Russian missiles in Cyprus.<sup>25</sup>

### ***The balanced Turkish diplomacy in the Balkans***

Turkey cannot *not* take into account the persistence and the strength of these resentments. It is under constant threat to be accused of returning to its warrior tendencies of the past. In February 1993, when the late President Turgut Özal undertook a tour of the Balkans, the defense minister of Greece immediately raised his voice against this "provocation" and, together with Serbia, accused Turkey of attempting to revive neo-ottomanism. Turgut Özal, described as a Muslim fundamentalist, is now accused of being a warmonger in the Balkans. According to the Serbs, Turkey had already stirred up religious sentiment among Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina and speeded up their indoctrination (declaration of the Serbian Foreign Minister V. Jovanovic<sup>26</sup>); now, it was about to unilaterally intervene in Bosnia.<sup>27</sup> With the Serbs in such a state of mind, one understands better their strong opposition to any deployment of Turkish soldiers in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Turkish contingent in the UNPROFOR (and later in the IFOR and SFOR) was therefore stationed in a non-Serbian area<sup>28</sup>, the Serbs having threatened to initiate serious incidents if they came into contact with the

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<sup>24</sup> It is worth mentioning that if Greece has indeed developed good relations with these "Orthodox countries", it has as well established good relations with Muslims countries like Syria, and more recently with Iran.

<sup>25</sup> "Turkey surrounded on four sides by missiles", *Radikal*, September 10, 1997; "The encirclement by missiles", *Cumhuriyet*, September 30, 1998; "Turkey encircled by missiles", *Türkiye*, March 2, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> *Turkish Probe*, December 9, 1993.

<sup>27</sup> Interview of Slobodan Milošević, *Hürriyet*, March 1, 1993; *Turkish Probe*, March 2, 1993, December 9, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> 1500 Turkish soldiers were deployed in June 1994 around Zenica in central Bosnia. They remained in roughly the same area (Zenica, Tuzla) after the Dayton agreement (zone under American control).

Turks. Greece, Bulgaria and Romania were as well opposed to the contribution of Turkey to peace missions in Bosnia.

This historical and emotional background is a serious handicap for Turkey, which has to act cautiously and cannot take any sharp position on the conflicts or tensions in the area. The anti-Turkish policy of Greece in western circles has already had disastrous consequences for Turkey. Therefore Ankara has systematically secured its Balkan diplomacy by the "principles and positions" of the international community, and carefully took symbolic initiatives. For example, one of the first actions of the Turkish contingent deployed in Zenica was to rebuild the Catholic Church, and Turkish leaders take every opportunity to recall the contribution of the country (in fact not so important, amounting to one million dollars) to the reconstruction of the historical bridge in Mostar, symbol of religious brotherhood.

Turkey had notably refused to actively participate in military interventions. When NATO issued an ultimatum to Serbia in February 1994, Turkey certainly backed this initiative but proposed its participation in air strikes only for logistic missions.<sup>29</sup> Again, in August 1995 during the operation *Deliberate Force*, Turkey welcomed the action but the Turkish Air Force did not participate in the actual bombing.<sup>30</sup> However, during the NATO strikes on the RFY in the Spring 1999, Turkey finally participated to the bombings. This represents, so, a noticeable change in the line followed during the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and reactions in the Turkish press were rather mitigated.<sup>31</sup> Turkish leaders themselves were kind of embarrassed and rumors spread in the press for a while before they confirmed it. A month before, Bülent Ecevit was categorically denying Turkey could participate in offensive missions.<sup>32</sup> But Turkey probably wanted here to strengthen its positions within the Alliance, and this, a few weeks after the Washington summit where it

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<sup>29</sup> *Milliyet*, February 11, 1994. A total of 18 Turkish F-16's were stationed in the Ghedi base in Italy to contribute to the implementation of the "no-fly zone".

<sup>30</sup> *Turkish Daily News*, August 31, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the editorials of İlter Türkmen, *Hürriyet*, May 5, 1999 and Sedat Ergin, *Hürriyet*, May 5, 1999.

<sup>32</sup> *Cumhuriyet*, April 4, 1999.

had to fight hard against the Franco-English proposal to establish an European Identity of Defense and Security which would have marginalized it.

Turkey has as well worked hand-in-hand with Washington in the planning of Turkish diplomacy in the area. It was only after the United States got involved in the settlement of the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1994-95 and after it recognized the FYROM (Republic of Macedonia) and signed military agreements with the latter, that Turkey itself took the step of signing military agreements with Macedonia (April 1995 and July 1996) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (august 1995 and January 1996). Again in the Spring 1998, when the beginning repression in Kosovo motivated the deepening of the military cooperation between Macedonia and NATO, Turkey, too, strengthened its own military cooperation with Skopje. As the United States, Turkey supported Albania, Macedonia and the Bosnian-Croat Federation, politically and militarily. Washington and Ankara undertook a collaborative effort to re-arm and train the Croat-Muslim army (in the framework of the US "Train and Equip Program").<sup>33</sup> The United States hoped, in fact, that the leading role played by Turkey in this program would, first, downplay the influence of Iran in Bosnia (henceforth unwelcome), and, second, raise contributions from other Muslim countries. The "Train and Equip Donors Conference" was organized in Ankara (March 1996) under the joint sponsorship of both countries. Ankara backed as well the rapprochement between the Muslims and the Croats made under the firm direction of United States. Since July 1994, Turkey has organized several trilateral meetings (Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Turks), although it is difficult to tell if this initiative was undertaken on its own or suggested by the Americans. A tripartite police force was set up in the fall of 1995 and some Croats were included in the contingents trained in Turkey.

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<sup>33</sup> The training began in May 1996 in two bases near Ankara. All of the armored units of the Bosnian army have been trained in Turkey. *Milliyet*, June 9, 1997.

## **Conclusion**

National policy is based more on a country's perception of its vulnerability and the threat it faces than on the objective reality of these threats. This principle applies especially to the case of the Balkans, due to the complex ethnic composition of the area and to the violent conflicts of the past. Minorities, particularly but not exclusively religious minorities, are perceived as vehicles of irredentism; the neighbor, when not suspected of nourishing Machiavellian intentions, suffers from an image soiled with negative stereotypes. Irrational fears, feelings of threat, syndrome of encirclement and a need to define enemies are—still—the common lot of peoples in the Balkans.

Despite the credo of the Turkish Republic since its foundation – i.e. the Westernization and the break with the Ottoman past – Turkey has to deal with "its" Ottoman heritage. The weight of the rancor and aversion toward the Turks, the affinity with the Muslims in the Balkans sought or imposed by the events or some political classes in Turkey, cannot be ignored by the government.

Islam tends to become a central element in the reconstruction of the identities among the Muslims in the Balkans<sup>34</sup> and in Turkey (*Türk-Islam Sentezi*). But if this evolution raises questions, they have remained (at least in Turkey) confined to a debate of its identity and have no effect on foreign policy.

Until now, Turkey has not based its foreign policy on religious criteria. This has not prevented it from developing economic relations with the Middle East in the 1970's. Clearly the center of gravity of its foreign policy moved toward areas inhabited by Muslims (Balkans, Caucasus, Central Asia). However, Turkey has simply grabbed the opportunity provided by the opening of these areas to the outside world to develop its political and economical influence. Its secular and westernized identity is not fading with the newly established relations with the Turkic world, even if the common culture is

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<sup>34</sup> This is this idea, widely spread in Bosnia of the predestination of the conversion to Islam. According to this theory, the Islamization of the Bosnians is viewed in terms of survival of the community. Pressed between the persecutions of the Catholic Croats and the Orthodox Serbs, the Bosnians owe their survival as a people to their Islamization. This analysis allows the Bosnians to affirm their cultural specificity and to anchor it in the distant past.

regularly put forward to back its attempts to strengthen its positions. These affinities are certainly truly felt but, in the end, they are advocated to justify or reinforce a position which is, before anything else, political. Since 1991, it is in fact with Orthodox Russia that Turkey has developed its deepest economic relations, with Albania but as well with the Republic of Macedonia that it established the closest political and military ties, and, in the Balkans, to Romania that it extended the most credits.