

READING DIPLOMATIC CODE

By Michael Ventura

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“Can Turkey Unify the Arabs?”

Say what?

That headline fronted the Sunday, May 29, *New York Times* “Week in Review.” I read it and laughed, thinking, “Ok, things are getting more interesting when *The New York Times*, our major voice of mainstream affluence, puts so zany a question in a headline (or anywhere else).”

The *Times* is fastidious about getting its facts straight, communicates as much by what it omits as by what it prints, and is a dependable guide to what is acceptable or soon will be acceptable in the higher circles of policy-making. *Times* editors and columnists have an extraordinarily high level of access and are careful not to alienate sources through whom and about whom they report. Be it fact or opinion, if it’s in the *Times* it’s in the wind – or the offices – of policy makers. *Times* commentary can be contradictory, but only about specifics, not its view that enlightened Western-flavored imperialism; heavily centralized government; and moderately regulated corporate capitalism best serve our country and the world. (Columnists who drift from that consensus leave, as Bob Herbert recently did.)

The game of reading between the lines is what makes the *Times* fun, and an article like “Can Turkey Unify the Arabs?” is rich fun for we who tirelessly and pointlessly try to figure out a world that spins beyond understanding, as it always has.

The article, by Anthony Shadid, enthuses about aspirations of a newly empowered Turkey to exert its influence in the “region,” meaning Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the lesser Middle East states. Hype aside, the article’s two meaty sentences are: “The resources of northern Iraq are strategic for Turkey’s plans to diversify its energy sources and to feed a pipeline from Turkey to central Europe. A common free-trade area has already been agreed upon by Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.”

That signals big changes in the Middle East, changes that cannot be controlled by the American political establishment; however, the prominence of such an article in such a paper signals that establishment’s approval. (The American political establishment has no party. George W. Bush’s defense secretary still serves under Obama, and Obama’s treasury secretary was brought to political prominence by Bush.)

Turkey is nominating itself as the West’s Muslim counterweight to Iran while offering Europe a natural gas pipeline to bypass Russia’s. Merely by stepping up to the plate, Turkey promises many a future headline. The concept of a Muslim country as a stabilizing force is new to world thought.

Applause for Turkey’s move from a prime organ of the American political establishment is even newer, especially if it is consistent.

On June 1, three days after “Can Turkey Unify the Arabs?,” the same writer wrote a front-page portrait of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, singing Erdogan’s praises, essentially assenting to Erdogan’s “contention that Turkey will be Europe’s second biggest economy after Germany by 2050,” and noting (without dismay) that Erdogan is “building relationships with Iran and Arab neighbors at the expense of Israel.

For decades, the *Times* and the establishment it represents have almost automatically supported Israel. In diplomatic circles, two such *Times* articles in three days constitute a fanfare for a tectonic shift in policy explained in the June 1 article: "But sensing a decline of American power in the region, Turkish officials have become sharply more assertive in the Middle East." The timing and placement of these articles signals that America's helplessness in the Middle East has been accepted by powerful U.S. factions at the highest levels, saying, in effect: "Turkey, have at it and welcome. Israel, good night and good luck."

Some U.S. factions passionately disagree, and they are far more vocal but much less powerful.

In my files I found another front-page *Times* article by Shadid from Jan. 5, in which he marshals facts to support the conclusion that Turkey's "process of globalization and attention to the markets of the Middle East is upsetting assumptions that only American power is decisive."

Those assumptions were drastically upset by developments in the endless stalemate known as the Middle East peace process. Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans had been pissing each other off as usual; and, as usual, neither begging nor bribery stopped Israel from building new settlements on the West Bank. The difference was George J. Mitchell, arguably the world's most respected negotiator, appointed chief U.S. envoy on Obama's second day in office. Mitchell "largely abandoned his efforts after a failed push last year" (*The New York Times*, May 14, p.10). He officially resigned May 13 but hadn't been to Israel since December after sharp exchanges between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu -- exchanges which earned Netanyahu an unprecedented scold in a *Times* editorial (Nov. 13, 2010, p.22): "What Mr. Netanyahu does not seem to realize is that a peace deal with the Palestinians is not a favor to President Obama. It is vital to Israel's long-term security."

Things must have been popping in the inner circles of the American political establishment. My guess is that George Mitchell and his staff vented privately and extensively, because the reflexively pro-Israel *Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman let loose a diplomatic barrage: "The people running Israel and Palestine have other priorities. It is time we left them alone to pursue them -- and to live with the consequences. They just don't get it: we're not their grandfather's America anymore. We have bigger problems."

In another newspaper from another writer that would mean nothing. From Friedman in the *Times* it means everything.

The U.S. gave it one more try. At the United Nations, a U.S. veto in February stopped a Security Council condemnation of Israel's continuous settlement building, earning Obama the censure of the European Union and of the entire Arab world. Israel thanked Obama like so: "On the eve of a White House meeting between President Obama and President Shimon Peres of Israel, [Israeli] officials... took steps... to advance controversial new housing in the West Bank and a disputed area of Jerusalem" (*The New York Times*, April 5, p.4).

Obama responded with his now-famous speech on May 19, the day before his meeting with Netanyahu, officially demanding a Palestinian state on terms he knew in advance that Israel would not accept.

The talking heads talked their heads off, signifying nothing, but a bomb was dropped in Friedman's *Times* column of May 25: He equated the Israeli government with the Palestinian leadership, calling both "ossified, unimaginative, oxygen-deprived." Then he took it further, addressing Netanyahu directly: "Sir, you are well on your way to becoming the Hosni Mubarak of the peace process."

Four days later, on May 29, the *Times* started publishing front-page love letters to Turkey.

The posturing of Obama and Netanyahu is business as usual taken to extremes. A change in the basic stance of *The New York Times* signals a zeitgeist shift in the American political establishment.

Meanwhile, the so-called "Arab Spring" continues unpredictably.

A new edition of Middle East history comes next. That history will ultimately be decided not by geopolitics but by water availability and changing demographics. But on the way, expect a new kind of mess.

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