

Turkey:

Erbakan at Six Months

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Necmettin Erbakan, who holds power with a bare five-vote majority, nevertheless has a surprisingly strong grip on the prime ministry. Although constrained from implementing the more radical aspects of his foreign policy agenda, Erbakan has marked Turkish policy with a firm stamp of orientation toward Islamic states, particularly radicals like Iran, Iraq, and Libya; in the process he has projected to the outside world an image of Turkey as a bifurcated state, one part secular and Western-oriented, the other Islamist and oriented toward the East. Politically, he has the apparent good fortune to be in power when both the European Union and the United States have reneged on important pledges to Turkey -- the former case involving economic aid, the latter weapons sales -- thus undermining Turks who advocate a strongly pro-Western foreign orientation.

Firmly in the saddle. With its slim majority and odd-couple ideological quality, the government of Erbakan's Refah and junior coalition partner Tansu Ciller's True Path Party (TPP) was not expected to last long after it was announced June 28. It has held together fast, however, because of the surprisingly firm hold Ciller has on her secularist ranks. It passed its toughest test, when a parliamentary motion to censure (and thus topple) the government following Erbakan's Libya trip -- a seeming public-relations disaster during which Erbakan sat silently while Qadhafi urged him to embrace Kurdish independence -- failed. That embarrassment for the opposition quieted press outrage over the Libya snafu and left Erbakan's secular opponents stunned and without an immediate game-plan.

On domestic policy, Erbakan has presided over a stumbling economy (not unlike his predecessors) and has accomplished virtually nothing even of his Islamic agenda. Still, he is holding his own in polls, and most Turkish secularists are convinced their best option is to play defense, i.e., leave Refah in power and wait for voters to turn against Erbakan as the economy crumbles. One advocate of this position privately -- and poetically -- predicted that the next few months would be "the winter of Refah." Given Erbakan's success in outsmarting his secular opponents in recent months and years, however, it is not at all certain that such a scenario will come to pass. Moreover, the rivalry between right-of-center secularist Ciller, and Mesut Yilmaz, leader of the Motherland Party (a TPP ideological look-alike), remains the centerpiece of secularist politics. Their mutual hatred is Erbakan's insurance: Each prefers coalition with Erbakan to coalition with the other. Two weeks ago Yilmaz offered to support Erbakan if the latter

would expel Ciller and the TPP from the coalition.

Square-off with the military. The mutual disdain between Erdogan's ranks and the powerful Turkish military is palpable. The military has privately informed Erdogan of its red lines -- in particular, the secular legal structure, NATO membership, defense ties with the U.S. and Israel -- and reinforced them with a series of statements and leaks warning against any effort to alter the secular structure of the state. Most recently, military leaders were angered by last week's visit of Iranian President Rafsanjani, whose nation they suspect of supporting PKK terrorism. Erdogan has avoided direct confrontation with the military, instead trying to take it on with indirect measures, such as withholding part of the defense budget as a prime ministerial discretionary fund. Aware of the many problems a military intervention would cause Turkey domestically, diplomatically, and economically, the military is disinclined to intervene directly.

Foreign policy. In foreign policy, the military (exercising its influence through the half-military, half-civilian National Security Council) has reined in Erdogan's radical anti-Western and anti-Israeli tendencies. Thus, all alliances and formal agreements with the U.S., Western Europe, and Israel remain intact. Erdogan even signed off on a \$650 million deal with Israel for upgrading Turkish F-4s, an arrangement Erdogan continues to criticize.

At times, Erdogan has even proven valuable for the Turkish establishment. In August, he signed a \$23 billion natural gas deal with Iran -- an arrangement supported across the political spectrum in Turkey but one which traditionally pro-Western elements might have felt uneasy signing because of U.S. sensitivities. And his known distaste for Operation Provide Comfort has enhanced Turkish negotiating leverage over its terms.

But Erdogan's focus on ties with Islamic radicals has put deeply into question the hopes many once harbored that responsibilities of office would moderate Erdogan. Among some of his more striking departures from traditional Turkish foreign policy practice: accusing the U.S. (in thinly-veiled fashion) of "terrorism" against Libya; claiming that the U.S. had established Operation Provide Comfort in order to establish an independent Kurdish state on Turkish territory; signing a communique in Tripoli calling for Turkish-Libyan counter-terrorism consultations and efforts; suggesting a defense industrial cooperation agreement with Iran; hosting representatives of Hamas, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, and Algeria's FIS at his political party convention; failing to acknowledge Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's congratulatory note and request for a meeting. Because of their certainty that the National Security Council will restrain his worst tendencies, outsiders, including NATO allied governments, tend to ignore many of his excesses, such as the pledge of counter-terrorism cooperation with Libya. Sometimes Erdogan's omissions are more remarkable than his remarks. While the Turkish foreign ministry continues its traditional criticism of Syrian support for the PKK, for example, Erdogan maintains silence about the complicity in anti-Turkish terrorism of neighboring Muslim states.

Erdogan's belated agreement yesterday to allow his long-time associate, Minister of State for economic affairs Fehim Adak, to accept a two-months-old invitation to Washington from the U.S. Treasury Department, was no doubt an effort to calm the military and other secularists upset with his Islamic orientation; his dithering over that decision probably reflects his own ambivalence about the U.S. It nevertheless remains an open question whether Erdogan wants good ties with the U.S. -- which he long cursed but now, as prime minister and presumably seeking to mollify the military, sometimes refers to as "friend" or "ally" -- or is seeking cleverly to open a breach with the U.S. that a witting Turkish military never would allow. The Rafsanjani trip, and Erdogan's remark about defense industrial cooperation with Tehran, occurred at the very time that many U.S. officials were gearing up to defend the Turkish-Iranian natural gas deal and thus avoid mechanisms required by the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act.

Playing into Erdogan's hands. Erdogan has long argued, to telling political effect, that the West will never fully accept Turkey as a friend and partner. The traditional counter-argument of pro-Western secularists has been that support from the West is crucial to Turkey's national security. In that regard, recent actions by both the U.S. and the

European Union have (however unintentionally) boosted Erdogan's side of the argument. At Greek instigation -- although ostensibly because of disappointment with Turkey's human rights record -- the EU has been withholding hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of funds promised to Turkey to help it adjust to a customs union agreement the two parties signed last year. (Human rights is not part of the agreement.) Erdogan was one of Turkey's leading opponents of customs union; it would not be surprising were Erdogan to raise the possibility of voiding the agreement based on breach of contract by the EU. Meanwhile, two major arms transfers promised by the U.S. (one privately, the other publicly by President Clinton in the presence of President Demirel) have been blocked, one by pro-Greek Congressmen, the other by human rights concerns in the Administration and on Capitol Hill.

Outlook. Virtually no senior official in the U.S. or EU wishes to boost Erdogan's and Davutoglu's political stock. Recent decisions by both entities, however, may have done exactly that. When Erdogan turned down the EU dinner invitation -- the rationale he offered was that Turkey should be invited to the entire EU summit, not only dinner-- many Turks cheered this blow on behalf of Turkish pride. As Erdogan decides his options for the weeks and months ahead -- early elections, new coalition partners, or standing pat -- his assessment of public opinion will be a crucial desideratum and growing popular disaffection with the West a potentially crucial political ally.

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