

Farewell, President Demirel

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Jun 27, 2015

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Among many distinctions, the former leader had a sharp mind and wit, and a passion for U.S.-Turkish ties.

Turkey has said farewell to former president Suleyman Demirel, who as a figure in Turkish politics since the 1960s served seven times as the country's prime minister, crowning his political tenure as president between 1993 and 2000. Demirel was the last in a line of visionary center-right Turkish politicians: pious Muslims who did not wear their religion on their sleeves when it came to politics, especially in foreign policy.

Prime Minister Adnan Menderes set up the center-right pillar of Turkey's political system through the Democrat Party (DP) in the 1950s. The DP took Turkey into NATO in 1952.

After the 1960 coup, the generals brought down the DP and executed Menderes, but his pro-free market and pro-U.S. vision survived into the DP's successor, the Justice Party (AP), which Demirel took over in 1964. Demirel, a U.S.-trained engineer, became Turkey's prime minister for the first time in 1965.

Prosperity marked the Demirel years in government, as did the rise of a Turkish working class. In 1971, a coup aimed at cracking down on rising leftist movements also ousted Demirel, ending his second term as the country's prime minister.

After democracy was restored in Turkey in 1973, Demirel became a staunch anti-leftist, often using divisive rhetoric and building broad right-wing government coalitions composed of his AP, Islamists, and ultra-nationalists, in order to block the left from coming to government. Turkey subsequently descended into a maelstrom, marked by street fighting between right- and left-wing militias and an economic collapse. After the coup of 1980, the generals banned Demirel from politics, a punishment that lasted until 1987, when a popular referendum allowed him to return to politics.

This time, he took over the True Path Party (DYP), one of the two pillars of center-right politics in Turkey during those years. The other was the Motherland Party (ANAP), led by Turgut Ozal, who had been elected prime minister in 1983. True to the center-right tradition's political antecedents, Ozal, a pious Muslim, was also at home in the West, and in 1987 he applied to join the European Union. Demirel did not get along well with Ozal, but this time he did things differently. He was less divisive, even choosing to enter a coalition with the left in 1991.

When Ozal, who had become president in 1989, died prematurely in 1993, Demirel became president, assuming his last and symbolically most important political job (Ataturk was Turkey's first president, and in every Turk there is a little Ataturk).

As the president, Demirel worked tirelessly behind the scenes to prevent the country's fractured center-right forces in ANAP and DYP from committing political hara-kiri.

At the same time, true to his origins as a pious, pro-Western politician, he worked to build Turkish-Israeli ties. In 1998, Demirel became the first Turkish president to visit Israel. In 1996, the Turkish government signed a free trade agreement (FTA) with Israel, which to this day has been the backbone of Turkish-Israeli ties. When relations between the two countries collapsed after the 2010 flotilla incident, the FTA kept Turkish-Israeli relations chugging along. Bilateral trade has continued to increase, reaching \$5.6 billion in 2014. One day, when the Turkish and Israeli leaders decide to restore the Turkish-Israeli relationship, they will find a solid base built by Demirel.

After finishing his term as president in 2000, Demirel retired to an apartment in downtown Ankara, where he would host visitors, watching in horror the political suicide that the two center-right parties finally committed in 2001. The infighting between ANAP and the DYP and their corruption led to Turkey's worst ever economic crisis that year.

The complete meltdown of the country's economy, and with that its dominant center-right political pillar, catapulted the Islamists -- hitherto considered a marginal movement -- to power. Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) assumed government in 2002, and since then Turkey's Western vocation has taken a nosedive.

Growing up in a working-class family in Turkey during the 1970s, I did not really like Demirel the politician. Years later, however, I developed a deep fondness for Demirel the statesman. I visited him a number of times in Ankara after his retirement, and he awed me with his sharp analysis of Turkish and global politics.

In 2007, I took a delegation of trustees of my current employer to visit him. He was eighty-three. He met us in his library on his feet, with a desk full of the most recently published books in the U.S. In the ensuing two-hour conversation, he blew everyone's doors off with his sharp mind, wit, intellect, and passion for U.S.-Turkish ties.

Demirel comes from a great line of Turkish politicians of the center-right, including Menderes and Ozal. They were all religious Muslims, but this was not the crux of their policies. Instead, they promoted Turkey's Western vocation. Conservative they were, Erdogan they were not. May they rest in peace. Farewell, President Demirel.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>), named by the Foreign Policy Association as one of the ten most important books of 2014. ❖

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