

# The Muslim Brotherhood's Fall Lands Turkey an Unexpected Ally: Kurds

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Aug 16, 2013

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## With the Brotherhood's power bids failing across the Middle East, Turkey has turned to the Kurds to shield itself from regional instability.

**T**oday, Turkey and Egypt recalled their ambassadors from each other's capital, signaling a major downturn in bilateral ties. At the same time, Turkey's influence in Cairo seems to be winding down.

Indeed, Turkey's ambitious drive to become a Middle East power by influencing the region's Muslim Brotherhood-inspired parties appears to have been upended. The Brotherhood has fallen from government in Egypt, failed to elect its candidate to lead the Syrian opposition, and has been sidelined in Libya. Qatar, which had hitherto allied itself with Ankara to fund MB-style parties, appears to be changing its heart after an unexpected change in leadership.

With the MB clinging to power only in remote Tunisia, Ankara has turned to an unexpected Middle East ally: Kurds, an ethnic group the Turkish government has historically been at odds with. Turkey's goal this time, though, is not to shape the region, but simply to shield itself from massive Middle East instability.

After coming to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Ankara introduced a novel foreign policy that turned the country's attention to the Middle East, a shift that ultimately wedded the Turkish government to the MB.

Prior to the AKP era, the Turks had mostly chosen to stay away from Middle East conflicts. Following the republican ethos of the country's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the country's citizens -- and especially foreign policy elites -- had come to think of themselves as a European nation that had been placed accidentally next to the Middle East. They then proceeded to stay away from the region and its complicated problems.

The AKP changed all that. If Ataturk saw Turkey as the Argentina of the Middle East, a country physically in the region but mentally in Europe, the AKP envisioned Turkey as the Brazil of the Middle East, a rising economic power with a burning desire to shape regional events. To this end, the new elites in Ankara pursued deep economic and

political ties with the region's governments, including Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria.

Trade between Turkey and these countries boomed, and diplomatic ties took off. Between 2002 and 2009, for instance, the Turkish foreign minister made at least eight trips to Iran and Syria alone.

Turkey's ties with Syria especially benefited from this trend: Ankara and Damascus lifted visa restrictions for travel, and the two country's cabinets started holding joint sessions, bringing key interior, justice and foreign ministers together in regular closed meetings. Flaunting its perceived influence in Syria and beyond, Ankara even floated the idea of a "Shamgen Zone," a play on the European Union's Schengen free travel area and Sham, the traditional name for Syria in Arabic, which envisioned bringing together Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon under a customs and political union.

Turkey's post-2002 Middle East focus brought it close to not only the region's governments, but also various MB-style parties across the region. The AKP, once shunned as a hardline Islamist party but recently rehabilitated, saw itself as a model forward for the MB.

The AKP elites believed that if they could moderate and come to power through democratic elections in Ankara, like-minded Egyptian and Syrian MBs should be able to do the same in Cairo and Damascus, respectively. Hence, Turkey's dream: a region ruled by MB parties, looking to Turkey.

With the start of the Arab Spring, Ankara's vision seemed to come to fruition. The MB rose to power in Egypt and Tunisia and Libya. In Syria, Ankara and Doha started aggressively supporting the MB to make it the leader of the country's opposition.

But unfortunately for Ankara, the vision of Turkish power in the Middle East through the MB did not last. Morsi's ouster in Egypt has been the biggest blow to Ankara's designs. At the same time in Syria, the MB is losing to the radical Jabhat al-Nusra on the battlefield, and is being supplanted by the Saudi-backed forces in the political opposition.

Turkish influence has also waned in Jordan and Iraq, whose leaders publicly chide Ankara for its support to their MB opposition. Last but not least, Ankara has lost favor with the Saudis, who disagree with the AKP's pro-MB policy and are happy to see the Qataris peel away from Turkey.

All this leaves Ankara almost alone in the region, with just Nahda in Tunisia and Hamas in Gaza as its allies -- two hardly promising proxies.

Hence, Ankara's pivot toward the Kurds in Syria, Iraq, and also inside Turkey. This is especially surprising since until recently, the Kurds and Turkey had hostile views of each other.

For starters, Turkey has, since 2007, built good ties with the Iraqi Kurds, who see Ankara as a necessary ally to keep their autonomy vis-a-vis the central government in Baghdad. And following Syria's decentralization, the Kurds there have grasped onto an opportunity to spin themselves out of central government control, following the Iraqi Kurdish model.

Both Iraqi and Syrian Kurds consider Turkey a key ally against Arab nationalism. Turkey, for its own part, sees the Kurdish regions of northern Iraq and Syria across from its border as a cordon sanitaire that will shield it from long-term civil war and sectarian strife in these two countries.

Turkey's rapprochement with its own Kurds completes this puzzle nicely. Ankara has recently launched peace talks with Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group which it had hitherto fought incessantly. Now, Turkey has a different take on the PKK. The PKK controls many Kurdish-majority towns in northern Syria and is an integral part of Turkey's plans to establish a likely buffer zone in that country.

There is also a domestic angle to Ankara's rapprochement with the PKK: Turkish prime minister and AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan wants to be elected as the country's next president in the 2014 elections. For Erdogan to maintain his vote-getting strongman image, the PKK has to be quiet. In return, Erdogan has promised amnesty to PKK members and house arrest to the organization's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who is currently serving a life sentence on an isolated island jail.

All this makes the Kurds Turkey's new regional ally. Even more incredible is the fact that the PKK, which Ankara saw as an existential threat for decades, is becoming Turkey's potential proxy in Syria. The latter development explains recent press reports that Turkey has started to act against weapons flows to al-Nusra, the PKK's chief rival in Kurdish areas of Syria.

Thanks to the demise of the MB and the war in Syria, Turkey's Kurdish policy has made a complete 180.

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