Tempered Islamism

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey's unique combination of Islamic and Western influences is hardwired into its institutions and citizenry, making a drastic turn in either direction both unlikely and inadvisable.

Turkey became a true multi-party democracy in 1950, and it has been holding free and fair elections ever since. Not counting the four years spent under military leadership following coups d'etat, this means the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has effectively run Turkey for nearly a quarter of the country's democratic history, thus becoming the longest-governing party in the history of the Turkish Republic.

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has not only managed the longest stint in government, it has boosted its popularity along the way. It has won three successive elections, each time with increased support; in the most recent election in 2011, the party received nearly 50% of the vote. These successes have granted the party almost complete dominance of the Turkish political space through appointments to the high courts, the military and the bureaucracy, as well as growing influence over the media, NGOs and the business community.

Owing to the AKP's roots in the Islamist opposition, a question that often comes up is whether the AKP will use its overbearing authority to Islamize the country, turning it into a Shari'a state. Many of the AKP's secular opponents point to the party's cultural policies, from a disdain for alcohol to the promotion of religious education in schools, to suggest that Turkey is on the path to Islamization. Recently, the government instituted optional religion classes for all students, starting in the fifth grade, and it has also cracked down on college campus parties where alcohol is

served.

WILL TURKEY BECOME A SHARI'A STATE?

The answer to this question is, probably, 'No.' Turkey's unique historical and political features make it unfertile ground for Shari'a law or radical Islamization.

To begin, the very concept of Shari'a has long been criminalized in Turkey, and this long-standing criminalization has had the effect of delegitimizing the notion of Shari'a, even among many of Turkey's most pious Muslims. Political scientist and expert on Turkish Islam Hakan Yavuz elaborates on this in an article entitled "Ethical not Shari'a Islam: Islamic Debates in Turkey." Thanks to the Westernization movement that produced the Young Turks and Ataturk (during whose reign "Shari'a" became a dirty word in Turkey), references to this sort of Islamist government have become laden with connotations of the "backward, underdeveloped and fanatical." Today, the Turkish constitutional court "associates Shari'a with a way of life both religious and backward."

This sets Turkey apart from Middle Eastern neighbors like Egypt, where all parties, including the secularists, have conceded nominally to Shari'a as a constitutional principle. In Turkey, taking that position is unfathomable. By contrast, in Turkey "Shari'a has a highly pejorative meaning," according to Yavuz. In the Turkish context, Islamization revolves not around the notion of Shari'a, but rather around an ethical Islam: Islam as an identity marker. In essence, because of the Westernization of Turkey that took root during the rule of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks simply do not "do" jihad or vie for radicalism.

It is therefore not surprising that while 82% of Pakistanis and Egyptians support the implementation of draconian punishments mandated by interpretations of Shari'a law, only 16% of Turks view these measures favorably according to polling by the Pew Research Global Attitudes Project. What is more, this percentage has not increased since the AKP came to power in 2002.

A second barrier to implementing Shari'a is pre-existing and institutionalized Westernization, a feature unique to Turkey among its Muslim neighbors in the Middle East. Essentially, Turkey is so thoroughly Westernized that even the AKP and the rising Islamist elites cannot escape the trappings of their Western mold. From the role of women in society to the country's membership in the NATO alliance, Turkey's Western legacy is an ineffable fact. For instance, regardless of how Islamized Turkey becomes, it will be impossible to take women out of the public space. Women's participation in public life, so deeply engrained in the old secularist Turkey, is also a trademark of the new Turkey. Consider its first lady, Hayrunnisa Gul, the wife of President Abdullah Gul and a former AKP member: she has a very public presence, and runs her own policy initiatives.

Perhaps most importantly, it is Turkey's embrace of liberal economics that has driven the AKP to the top in the first place. A good part of Turkish influence in the Islamic world is based on its success in the Western world economically and politically, and the somewhat different face of a Muslim population that Turkey's "soft power" communicates. These characteristics are relayed through mediums such as Turkish soap operas, which depict Turkey as a modern society in which women are empowered.

Turkey's structural Westernization -- its institutional connections to the West and its adoption of Western ways -- will also set it apart from other Muslim-majority societies in the region. It is hard to imagine that NATO presence would be so welcome in other Muslim-majority countries, but in Turkey, even the most diehard Islamists had reason to support the NATO alliance, because it protected Turkey against "godless" communism.

Last but not least, the legacy of constitutionally-mandated secularism, a feature shared only by Tunisia among the Arab countries and a legacy of Kemal Ataturk, will prevent Turkey's Islamization. Turkey is so thoroughly secularized that even its so-called Islamist leaders think in a secular manner regardless of how pro-religion they may be. Last year, when Prime Minister Erdogan landed at Cairo's new airport terminal (which was built by Turkish

companies), he was warmly greeted by joyous millions mobilized by the Muslim Brotherhood. However, he soon upset his pious hosts by preaching about the importance of a secular government that provides freedom of religion, using the Turkish word *laiklik* -- derived from *laite*, the French word for secularism. In Arabic, this term loosely translates as "irreligious." Erdogan's message may have been partially lost in translation, yet the incident illustrates the stark difference in mindset despite Erdogan's pedigree as an Islamist activist in Turkey.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

All this suggests that Turkey's Islamization will be tempered by a history that has rendered the very concept of Shari'a an anathema. Still, a threat looms for Turkey: the conflict in Syria.

Since Autumn 2011, when Ankara started to confront the Assad regime and support the rebels, Turkey has employed various means to undermine Assad. To this end, Ankara has been allowing foreign fighters, including jihadists, into Syria in an effort to weaken the Assad regime. This poses grave risks for the country. Jihadists transiting through Turkey will inevitably leave their mark by establishing personal connections and networks, improving logistics skills (such as by opening up bank accounts under false names to fund potential future operations, or obtaining secure communication devices), and proselytizing and recruiting.

There is no guarantee that such jihadists will not target Turkey one day. Al-Qaeda attacked Turkey in 2005, and Turkish police recently uncovered an Al-Qaeda plot to assassinate a number of prominent Turkish public personalities. With so many jihadists traveling through the country and learning the weaknesses of the Turkish security establishment, Ankara is exposed to a real danger: Al-Qaeda could bite the Turkish hand that now allows it into Syria.

When one of the authors of this essay asked Turkish officials if they were concerned about jihadist influence in neighboring Syria, they responded that "Turkish security officials know who these jihadists are and will deal with them accordingly after the fall of the Assad regime." This could prove to be a tall order for Ankara. The flipside of Turkey not having had a native jihadist problem is that Turkish officials have little experience in dealing with jihadist groups. In other words, while Ankara thinks it is taking advantage of the jihadists, in fact the jihadists could be taking advantage of Turkey. Given the fact that the Turkish-Syrian border has become increasingly porous since 2011, Turkey might find itself with a jihadist problem on the border it shares with Syria, where Al-Qaeda affiliates have made significant gains in recent months. Turkey may still fall unwittingly into Al-Qaeda's cross-hairs in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime.

Nations are subject to change, sometimes swiftly and dramatically. And so, of course, any sweeping conclusions about Turkey's destiny come with a bold caveat. Nevertheless, Turkey's unique combination of Islamic world and Western influence is likely to serve as a compass for the future, regardless of specific changes in one or another direction. This combination is hard-wired into both individuals and institutions, and it produces measurable results. Conversely, a Turkey that turns it back to either of its main sources of national personality will open the door to internal strife, forfeit its allure for the industrialized world and for its Middle Eastern neighbors, and encounter difficulties sustaining its extraordinary social political development, economic rise, and diplomatic success.

Ambassador James F. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz distinguished visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. Soner Cagaptay is director of the Institute's Turkish Research Program and author of the forthcoming book The Rise of Turkey: The 21st Century's First Muslim Power. ❖

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