

# How Does the New Turkey Think?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Apr 30, 2012

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



## Articles & Testimony

**T**urkey has changed so drastically in the past decade that it has become largely unrecognizable. For starters, the country has experienced a sort of economic miracle, nearly tripling its economic output in the past decade and subsequently joining the ranks of the elite G-20 club.

Politically, too, Turkey has undergone a complete transformation: The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has won three consecutive elections since 2002, with increasing majorities. The AKP, representing a brand of Islam-based social conservatism, has since replaced Turkey's former secularist elites.

Secularist Kemalism is out and the AKP is in, and Turkey no longer suffers from a weak economy as it did in the 1990s. How does this change the way Turks see the world? The answer is: something "old," something "new," and something "borrowed" shapes Turkey's foreign policy today.

Let's start with the "old": Kemalism is out, but the old nationalist mindset is not. Take, for instance, the secularist Turkish stance on Cyprus, which has defended Turkish Cypriot sovereignty whatever the political cost. Today, Ankara is as much committed to this goal as the secularist Turkish parties were before they were replaced by the AKP.

The same applies to Turkey's policy of fighting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) across the Middle East for the ultimate end goal of inflicting a crushing military defeat on this terror group. The AKP appears as committed to this policy as the country's previous leaders, such as Suleyman Demirel.

Not much has changed on the rapprochement with Armenia either. Despite some earlier signs, which suggested that the AKP may modify Ankara's policy on this issue, when push came to shove, the party ultimately stayed loyal to Turkey's established policy of demanding that Armenia vacate occupied Azerbaijani territory before Ankara could consider normalizing ties with Yerevan.

Ironically, even though Kemalism seems to be out of fashion, its nationalist mindset seems to have permeated its successor – the AKP – nonetheless. How come? In many ways, the AKP represents a post-Kemalist Turkey. But 80 years of Kemalism preceding AKP rule, and 150 years of Ottoman Westernization before that – giving way to Kemalism, have left such an indelible mark on Turkey that even the "post-Kemalist AKP" will be "Kemalist" in some ways.

Foreign policy is a case in point. And this could work in positive ways too. Take, for instance, the “old” Turkey’s staunch commitment to NATO, as a valuable security alliance, as well as an anchor tying Turkey to Washington. Today, this anchor appears to be as strong as it was in the pre-AKP Turkey, which was most recently demonstrated by Ankara’s decision to join NATO’s key missile defense project.

Besides, the “old,” there is also the “new” that shapes the thinking of the new Turkey, and this is solidarity with fellow Muslims. As shown by Ankara’s activist policy in Somalia, Afghanistan, the Middle East and the Balkans, the new Turkey, guided by the AKP’s emphasis on empathy with Muslims, will try to help Muslims anywhere in the world where there is conflict.

And what would be the “borrowed” aspect in shaping the new Turkey’s foreign policy outlook? That appears to be a “BRIC attitude,” that is, the demand of an economically ascendant power to be recognized as a political actor in the international arena.

However, Turkey’s “borrowed” “BRIC attitude” is less like that of China, which includes overseas outreach and concomitant denial of any overarching political goals, and more like Brazil’s. In the same manner that ascendant Brasilia sees itself as the country that knows Latin America best and would like Washington to consult it on South American affairs, rising Ankara sees itself as the country that knows the Middle East best and would like Washington to consult it on Middle East business.

So a new country that is still nationalist, and has an added layer of Muslim sensitivities in foreign policy, is committed to NATO, and views itself as the BRIC of the Middle East, or to put it succinctly, the “old,” “new” and the “borrowed” elements shaping Turkey’s new foreign policy.

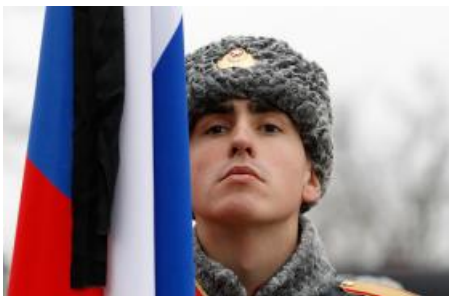
*Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.* ❖

*Hurriyet Daily News*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

---

### [The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



#### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Jay Solomon

[\(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter\)](#)



#### BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)

#### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

#### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)