

As Turkey's Foreign Policy Changes, So Does Turkey

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

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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.



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Though unique in many ways, Malaysia suggests lessons for Turkey's future: an increasingly ideologically oriented foreign policy enacted in tandem with a similarly informed social agenda can result in an illiberal and non-Western society, despite its economic modernity.

Since the founding of the republic, Turkish political institutions and mores have derived much of their internal strength from a specific external orientation. In other words, the institutionalization of the vision of a modernist, secular and liberal democratic Turkey necessitated -- especially at the time of the founding -- a modernist, secular and liberal democratic role model: Europe. Reforms were adapted from numerous European nations, solidifying Turkey's adherence to norms and institutions that many eventually came to see as both intrinsically European and Turkish. Furthermore, with the beginning of Turkey's journey towards the European Union and its demanding liberal democratic standards, Europe came to serve not only as a distant ideal on some disinterested pedestal, but an active agent in encouraging reform within Turkey as well. In short, Turkey's secular and democratic build-up has been inextricably tied to the nation's historic orientation towards the West.

Furthermore, Turkey's calibration towards the West went hand in hand with its efforts to align with Western interests in international affairs and to adopt those interests as its own. Indeed, despite various ups and downs in the relationship, Turkey's cooperation with the West throughout the Cold War, its entry into and participation in NATO and its post-Cold War support of numerous U.S. operations all amounted to a larger Turkish preference: to fundamentally anchor itself in the West.

Of what relevance is this assessment today? Turkey currently finds itself at odds with the U.S. on numerous crucial international issues, namely the Iranian nuclear dispute. Under the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government, Turkey has also unprecedentedly strained relations with its once-intimate ally, Israel. Not surprisingly, the AKP's Turkey now seems all too willing to keep its EU accession process stagnant as well.

One may argue against the widespread pessimism and urgency surrounding deteriorating Turkish-U.S. and Turkish-Israeli ties by pointing out the fickle nature of foreign policy-making, which tends to be excessively tactical and populist-driven. However, that does not assuage worries regarding the virtual cessation of Turkey's efforts towards EU accession, a mission both long-term and at one point extremely popular. While once a pillar of Turkish foreign policy, the notion of EU membership has devolved into nothing but a half-hearted AKP talking point meant to ease some of the concerns of liberal Turks.

What has replaced Turkey's traditional pro-Western foreign policy is one that the AKP claims is "non-aligned" and "non-ideological," but actually embodies an "affirmative action" approach towards certain ideologically-motivated regimes -- the AKP's passionate adoption of Hamas' cause as its own is but one manifestation of the party's worldview. Treating Israel before and after the Gaza flotilla crisis as if it were a lifelong enemy rather than a friend and vocally contravening international consensus on the Iranian nuclear program are other, more explicit examples.

Given the extent to which an external Western orientation has shaped Turkey's internal secular and democratic build-up, it should come as no surprise that a foreign policy shift towards an Islamist stance has caused its domestic realm to undergo change as well. On the level of popular perceptions, anti-Americanism has risen dramatically, with fewer Turks viewing the U.S. favorably than in Pakistan, and a higher proportion of Turks identify themselves as "Islamists" now than in 2002. Concretely speaking, Turkey has regressed on a number of indices measuring gender equality, rule of law and media and Internet freedoms. One also hears with increasing frequency of uncharacteristic police crackdowns on social venues -- such as restaurants and art galleries -- just because they happen to serve alcohol.

Some might suggest a silver lining, citing Turkey's booming economy and modernizing infrastructure as forces that will maintain the nation's liberal character. However, other cases have shown that a nation can, in fact, embody the AKP's non-Western socio-political vision while fostering an industrialized economy. Over the past few decades, Malaysia has emerged as a booming economy despite becoming increasingly socially conservative and religiously devout. For instance, it has a dual-justice system that allows Islamic law to govern the affairs of Muslims while common law applies to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Islamic-style clothing and social behavior has become a norm for women, and increasingly so for men, due in no small part to government measures.

Particularly relevant to Turkey is Malaysia's foreign policy during the period in which it underwent an upsurge in political Islam. Although originally

employing an anti-communist and pro-Western stance under Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia gradually shifted towards de jure non-alignment, which later became a de facto anti-Western orientation under Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohammad. With Mohammad at the helm, Malaysia embarked on an economically progressive path with a strong focus on the nation's Islamic background, harnessing Malaysian religious identity to garner support for his vision of "South-South" cooperation in anti-colonialist opposition to the traditionally dominant "North." In doing so, he created a cycle of Islamist foreign policy reinforcing Islamism and anti-Westernism at home, and vice versa.

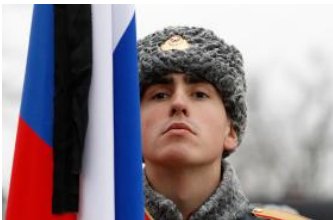
Sound eerily similar to the AKP's Turkey? Though unique in many ways, Malaysia suggests lessons for Turkey's future: an increasingly ideologically-oriented foreign policy enacted in tandem with a similarly-informed social agenda can result in an illiberal and non-Western society, in spite of its economic modernity. For Turkey's democracy -- which is especially sensitive to its external trajectory -- such a scenario cannot be ruled out, insofar as it continues to abandon its traditionally pro-Western foreign policy.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/template102.php?](#)

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