

Turkish Exceptionalism?

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Articles & Testimony

Some might claim that in spite of the intensifying Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led reorientation of Turkey's domestic and international agenda, Turkey will inevitably maintain, at the least, a fair balance between its Eastern and Western commitments and perhaps even continue to be a strong Western ally. Although some Turks boast about this intrinsic "Turkish exceptionalism" in explaining their country's unique ability, thus far, to mesh with the West, this is only a myth. Turkey has functioned as an exceptional Western Muslim country, not because the Turks are exceptional, but because they have lived in a system which has taught them that they share values, institutions, and interests with the West, and led them to collaborate with NATO, the United States, and the European Union accession process.

This is slowly coming to an end.

According to the 2010 Transatlantic Trends report, 55 percent of Turks feel Turkey has such different values from the West so as to make it non-Western. In 2004, 73 percent of Turks believed membership in the EU would be beneficial, but those numbers had dropped to 38 percent by 2010. The majority of Turks (53 percent) found NATO essential in 2004, but by 2010 this has eroded to less than one-in-three (30 percent).

This is not without consequences for Turkey's foreign policy. According to the same report, whereas 13 percent of Turks desire cooperation with the EU, down from 22 percent in 2009, the percentage of those desiring cooperation with Turkey's Muslim Middle Eastern neighbors has risen to 20 percent, up 10 points since 2009. What is more, despite U.S. President Barack Obama's outreach to Turks, their approval rating of him has dropped from 50 percent in 2009 to 28 percent in 2010. Even more alarming, the latest Pew Global Attitudes Project figures show that 56 percent of Turks view the U.S. as a "military threat." In short, Turkey is flipping under the AKP.

Not long ago, some would have expected the military and the secular echelon of Turkish society to intervene to guide Turkey on the right path. This is not the case anymore. The AKP's de-Kemalization has included civilianization, limiting the role of the army in the state's affairs, and has done so on the premise of an alleged coup. The government has since aggressively bullied the military and jailed opponents, successfully neutering the military and intimidating the opposition.

The use of illegal wiretaps against the government's opponents has created a republic of fear: anyone who opposes the AKP can land in jail under the most spurious allegations. In the latest incident, Hanefi Avci, a police chief famous for being a "communist hunter," was arrested when he published his memoirs, which described the AKP and its allies' use of wiretaps to intimidate opponents and recalcitrant bureaucrats. Ironically, the "communist hunter" police chief was charged with membership in a communist cell.

The implication of this newfound power, especially after the AKP successfully interfered in August to change the line of succession among the military's top brass, is that even the military will bend to the will of the ruling party and play along with its newfound leadership role in the "Muslim world." Most recently, the military remained quiet in October when the AKP objected to the placement of a NATO missile defense shield in Turkey, suggesting that it did not perceive Iran and Syria as threats within the NATO doctrine. Instead, they launched joint military exercises with China, making this the first such cooperation between a NATO member and Beijing. The question now is whether the military, under pressure from the AKP, will stop purging Islamist officers from its ranks. There are signs this practice will stop, opening the way for a grassroots Islamization of NATO's second largest army.

Turkey is certainly positioning itself as the leader of the Muslim world; however, it is unclear as of yet whether the Muslim world is ready to accept this imposition. While some, such as the Syrian regime, will look to Turkey for leadership, others, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, already consider themselves at the helm of the Muslim world and will not accept Turkish dominance. Moreover, non-Arab Muslim countries that also promote political Islam, e.g., Iran, might differ in vision as to who shall speak on behalf of the Muslim world. (Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that the AKP is already a popular force on the streets of Cairo and Damascus). Beyond any leverage the West has with the AKP, this leaves other Muslim governments as a check and balance to the AKP's ambitions to position Turkey as leader of a politically-charged "Muslim world."

However, if the AKP manages to perfect its foreign policy and co-opt its Middle Eastern neighbors -- the party's frustrated efforts this past summer to broker a nuclear deal between Iran and the West suggest otherwise -- it will position Turkey as the defender of global Islamist causes. The party has already worked to uproot the Kemalist-nationalist element of Turkish identity, a dangerous move in the post-9/11 environment, where adherents of a politically-defined Muslim identity are especially prone to viewing the world in a Huntingtonian fashion. Subsequently, one can expect the party to follow policies explicitly contrary to those of the U.S., Europe, and the West on a variety of issues ranging from Iran's nuclearization to Arab-Israeli peace, conflict in Sudan, and practically any problem involving Muslims. Such grandstanding policies will invariably make the populist-authoritarian AKP even more popular at home, and cement the demise of the socio-political milieu that made Turkey "exceptional" in the first place.

In other words, the AKP will bake its cake and eat it too, unless Kemalist Turkey re-emerges out of its own shadow. There are signs that since the secular opposition, the Republican People's Party, or CHP, elected Kemal Kilicdaroglu, a charismatic, pro-Western and social democratic leader as its head earlier this summer they are better poised against the AKP in the next elections. Kilicdaroglu is moving toward New Kemalism, boosting traditional Kemalism's commitment to Turkey's Western vocation while re-guiding it toward more liberal values, in order to make Kemalism attractive for 21st-century Turkey. New Kemalism might yet defeat the AKP. For that test, one has to wait for the results of the June 2011 elections, the most important battle for Turkey's soul in two centuries and two score [years] after the first Ottoman sultans decided to orient Turkey westwards.

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