

Why Turkey Will Emerge as the Leader of the Muslim World

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey is not thought of as the Muslim country par excellence, but Turkey is, perhaps, the most Muslim nation in the world. Due to its unique birth during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, as a state forged exclusively by and for Muslims through blood and war, Turkey is a Muslim nation by origin, a feature shared perhaps only with partition-created Pakistan.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secularization in the 1920s gave the country's core identity a Kemalist, nationalist veneer. However, a recent perfect storm has undone Atatürk's legacy: whereas the events of September 11 have, unfortunately, oriented Muslim-Western relations toward perpetual conflict, the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party, or AKP, in Ankara has helped re-expose the country's core identity. When the AKP came to power in 2002, many expected that the party's promise to de-Kemalize Turkey by blending Islam and politics would not only create a stronger Turkey in the West, but would prove Islam's compatibility with the West. The result, however, has been the reverse. The AKP has eschewed Atatürk's vision of Turkey as part of the West, replacing Western solidarity with a Manichean "us (Muslims) versus them" worldview. Hence, in the post-September 11 world, stripped of its Kemalist identity, Turkey's self-appointed role is that as leader of the "Muslim world." The country is, in fact, suited for this position: It has the largest economy and most powerful military of any Muslim nation. After years of successful de-Kemalization, the only obstacle that remains is convincing its Muslim brethren to anoint it as their sultan of the "Muslim world."

At its inception, Turkey was created as an exclusive Muslim homeland through war, blood, and tears. Unbeknownst to many outsiders, modern Turkey emerged not as a state of ethnic Turks, but of Ottoman Muslims who faced expulsion and extermination in Russia and the Balkan states. Almost half of Turkey's 73 million citizens descend from survivors of religious persecution. During the Ottoman Empire's long territorial decline, millions of Turkish and non-Turkish Muslims living in Europe, Russia and the Caucasus fled persecution and sought refuge in modern-day Turkey. With the Empire's collapse at the end of World War I, Ottoman Muslims joined ethnic Turks to defend their home against Allied, Armenian, and Greek occupations. They succeeded, making Turkey a purely Muslim nation born out of conflict with Christians. Religion's saliency as ethnicity lasted into the post-Ottoman period: when modern Greece and Turkey exchanged their minority populations in 1924, Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians from Anatolia were exchanged with Greek-speaking Muslims from Crete. All Muslims became Turks.

Although Atatürk emphasized the unifying power of Turkish nationalism over religious identity, Turkishness never replaced Islam; rather, both identities overlapped. Atatürk managed to overlay the country's deep Muslim identity with secular nationalism, but Turkey retained its Muslim core.

Turning to the present, post-September 11 world, states created on exclusively national-religious grounds are vulnerable to a Huntingtonian, bifurcated worldview of "us (Muslims) versus them." Until the AKP, Turkey was successfully driven by large pro-Western and secular elites and there was not much to worry in this regard. However, the AKP has replaced these elites with those sympathetic to the "us (Muslims) versus them" eschatology. AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, along with his government, believe in Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations -- only they choose to oppose the West. The AKP's vision as such is shaped by Turkey's philosopher-king, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who summarizes this position in his opus "Strategic Depth," in which he writes that "Turkey's traditionally good ties with the West...are a form of alienation" and that the AKP will correct the course of history, which has disenfranchised Muslims since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Undoubtedly, the AKP's "us versus them" vision would not have had the same powerful resonance had they come to power before September 11. Because those attacks defined a politically-charged "Muslim world," the AKP's worldview has found fertile ground and has changed not only Turkey itself, but also the nation's role in foreign policy.

To this end, the AKP took advantage of Turkish anger with the U.S. war in Iraq, casting it as an attack on Muslims, Turks included, which has reinforced their bipolar vision of Americans versus Muslims. Recently, while visiting Pakistan (of all places), Erdoğan claimed that "the United States backs common enemies of Turkey and Pakistan and that the time has come to unmask them and act together" -- Erdoğan later denied that he made these comments as reported in Pakistan's prominent English-language dailies.

The AKP's foreign policy vision is not simply dualistic, but rather premised on a la carte morals and selective outrage, wherein the real danger lies. One case in point is to compare the AKP's differing stances toward Emir Kusturica and Omar al-Bashir. The former, a Bosnian film director who stood with the Yugoslav National Army as it slaughtered Bosnians in the 1990s, was recently driven out of Turkey by AKP-led protests, resulting in threats against his life -- a plus for the victims of genocide in Bosnia. The latter, the Sudanese leader indicted for genocide in The Hague Court, however, was gracefully hosted by the AKP in Turkey. Erdoğan has said, "I know al-Bashir; he cannot commit genocide, because Muslims do not commit genocide." This is the gist of the AKP's la carte foreign policy vision: that Muslims are superior to others, their crimes can be ignored, and that anyone who stands against Muslim causes deserves to be punished.

The reason this vision will transform Turkey is because the country changes in tandem with its elites. Ever since the modernizing days of the Ottoman sultans, political makeover in the country has been induced from above, and today, the AKP is poised to continue this trend as it represents the culmination of Turkey's new elite, replete with pro-AKP and Islamist billionaires, media, think tanks, universities, TV networks, pundits, and scholars -- a full-fledged Islamist elite. Furthermore, individuals financially and ideologically associated with the AKP now hold prominent posts in the high courts since the September 12 referendum, which empowered the party to appoint a majority of the top judges without a confirmation process. In other words, the AKP now not only governs, but also controls Turkey.

Like their close neighbors, the Russians, Turks have moved lockstep with the powerful political, social and foreign policy choices that their dominant elites have ushered in over the ages. Beginning with the sultans' efforts to Westernize the Ottoman Empire in the 1770s, and continuing with Ataturk's reforms and the multi-party democracy experience that started in 1946, Turkish elites have cast their lots with the West. Unsurprisingly, the Turks adopted a pro-Western foreign policy, embraced secular democracy at home, and marched steadily toward European Union membership.

Now, with the AKP introducing new currents throughout Turkish society, this is changing. In foreign policy, the dominant wind is solidarity with Islamist and anti-Western countries and movements. After eight years of AKP rule -- an unusually long period in Turkish terms: if the AKP wins the June 2011 elections, it will have become the longest-ruling party in Turkey's multi-party democratic history -- the Turks are acquiescing to the power of the AKP and their "us versus them" mindset.

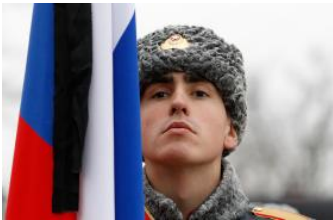
According to a recent poll by TESEV, an Istanbul-based NGO, the number of people identifying themselves as Muslim increased by 10 percent between 2002 and 2007, and almost half of them described themselves as Islamist. In effect, the AKP's steady mobilization of Turkish Muslim identity along with its close financial and ideological affinity with the nation's new Islamist elites is setting the stage for a total recalibration of Turkey's international compass.

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