

## NATO's Turkey Problem

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Articles & Testimony

The quarrel between Ankara and NATO over the proposed missile-defense initiative suggests that Turkey is becoming the Alliance's "opt-out" member in operations in Muslim countries. The governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) has so far refused to host the missile shield because it is directed against potential threats from two fellow Muslim countries -- Syria and Iran. The AKP considers itself the defender of a politically defined "Islamic civilization" and has recently moved closer to Damascus and Tehran.

Having already provoked a crisis with Washington when it voted against Iran sanctions at the United Nations Security Council in June, the AKP will probably want to avoid fresh troubles with the U.S. Public perception of American support for the AKP will also help the party at next year's elections. So there is a good chance that the AKP will eventually accept the missile-defense shield at NATO's summit in Lisbon this weekend. Expect Turkey's governing party though to drag its feet before implementing any agreement. Moreover, according to media reports, it might demand a high price for its approval. Most importantly, Ankara might insist that the defense shield's radar information will not be shared with third countries -- read: Israel.

Whatever the ultimate outcome, for the first time since joining NATO in 1952, Turkey has challenged an Alliance initiative. And in doing so, the AKP is wearing a politicized religious identity and ideology on its sleeve. It has already signaled a future rift with NATO over Iran and Syria by removing these two countries from its "Red Book," Turkey's official policy paper defining foreign security threats. Given that Turkey is the only NATO member bordering Iran and Syria, viewed by the U.S. as ballistic missile threats to NATO, this is a troubling strategic shift.

Under the AKP, Ankara will be the enfant noir of NATO. In the same way Greece opted out of and blocked NATO operations against criminal regimes in the Western Balkans, citing its "affinity with its Orthodox brothers," the AKP will use the "Islamic civilization" excuse to abstain from or hinder NATO operations in the "Muslim world."

The AKP's objection to the appointment of Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen as NATO secretary-general last year was a harbinger of troubles to come. Ankara objected to Mr. Rasmussen's appointment because of the way he "handled the cartoon crisis," demonstrating the party's Islamic weltanschauung.

For the AKP's brand of Islamism, however, respect is a one-way street. While others must respect Islamists, the latter are free to say whatever they want. In February 2009, for example, two months before the AKP's objection to Mr. Rasmussen over the Muhammad cartoons, Istanbul's AKP municipal government hosted an anti-Western and anti-Semitic cartoon exhibit in the city's central Taksim metro station.

When the AKP, rooted in Turkey's anti-Western and anti-democratic Islamist opposition, came to power in 2002, it seemed to show little interest in turning NATO into an ideological forum or in tinkering with the pro-Western orientation of Turkish foreign policy. But this seemed to have been only a tactical delay.

The AKP first went after pro-Western actors at home to prepare for the policy change abroad. The governing party has abused coup allegations to put the military in its barracks or behind bars, and its opponents, including prominent secular journalists and scholars, in jail. What's left of the independent and pro-Western media receive daily calls from the prime minister's office, prodding them to adjust their coverage in favor of the governing party, lest they face punitive fines.

Having consolidated its domestic position, the AKP began in 2005 to pursue also a new foreign policy, dividing the world along religious lines and rising to the defense of criminal regimes and Islamists.

As NATO membership provides Turkey with crucial technology and political clout, it is unlikely that the AKP is interested in ending the country's decades-old commitment to the Alliance. But particularly if the 2011 elections allow it to cement its rule, the AKP will increasingly use its NATO membership to undermine operations in the Muslim world and to defend its Manichean view of global politics.

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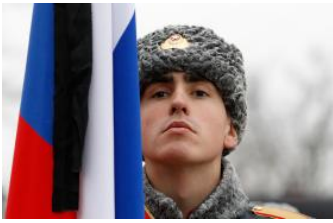
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