

Turkey under the AKP: Neither a European nor a Regional Power (Part 1)

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Articles & Testimony

When the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, came to power in 2002 in Turkey, many were satisfied with its assurance that it would make Ankara's European Union accession the chief aim of Turkish foreign policy, despite the party's Islamist pedigree. The promise of a European Turkey helped assuage fears both within Turkey and Europe about the AKP's Islamist roots: If the AKP desired a European Turkey, it could not possibly harbor Islamist tendencies.

Initially, the AKP held true to its promise and pushed for EU membership, legislating reforms and making Turkey a candidate country for talks in 2005. However, just as Turkey began accession talks, the party turned its attention to the Middle East, suggesting it would make Turkey a "center country," a bridge country earning the trust of both Europe and the "Muslim world."

Eight years later, the AKP has led Turkey to become neither a bridge between European states and the "Muslim world," nor a European country. If anything, it is becoming the tribune of a politically-defined Muslim world against the West, with an increasingly authoritarian government open to the reality of governance by Islamist politics.

No Europe under the AKP

The AKP, whose predecessor, the Islamist Welfare Party, or Refah, was banned in 1998 by Turkey's Constitutional Court -- a decision later upheld by the European courts -- emerged in 2001 with an avowedly non-Islamist platform. The party jettisoned Refah's anti-European rhetoric (Refah had dismissed the EU as a "capitalist and Christian club") and instead embraced the accession process.

However, in spite of its pro-European rebranding, the AKP never genuinely believed in a European destiny for Turkey, nor did the party possess a strategic view of EU membership. Instead, the AKP used the EU accession process merely as a tactical ploy to shed its Islamist image, gain credibility from the West and curb the power of the secular military under the guise of EU-sanctioned democratization.

Surely, vehement French objections significantly undermine Turkey's EU accession prospects. So far, all 22 countries that negotiated for EU membership were ultimately offered accession. Yet French President Nicolas Sarkozy wants to treat Turkey differently and opposes Turkey's membership regardless of the status of current accession talks.

Nevertheless, Turkey's accession has stalled for reasons that have as much to do with the AKP's lack of commitment to European values as the continual barricade of French objections. In fact, while I have always supported Ankara's membership bid, it is time to admit that the reason Turkey will not join the EU any time soon is not because of European reservations toward a Muslim country, but because of the AKP's reservations toward liberal values.

It is quite fathomable that Turkey could have broken French opposition to its EU entry by reforming aggressively toward European norms and rendering Sarkozy's objections obsolete.

Having ingratiated itself to both Brussels bureaucrats and liberal Turks until 2005, the AKP abruptly dropped the EU process as a top foreign policy priority just as it was expected to implement the toughest reforms towards full membership. It is now clear, however, that this sudden change was consistent with the AKP's tactical view of EU accession. The party pursued EU membership for as long as its accession policy had little domestic cost and gained the AKP much in terms of legitimacy in Europe as a pro-EU (and ostensibly non-Islamist) party. However, once substantive accession talks began in 2005 and the domestic economic and political costs of EU reforms became apparent, the AKP withdrew from the EU process, judging the benefits of a cool attitude towards the EU to supersede those of membership in it.

In addition to the AKP's calculations of the domestic political costs of enacting the unpopular reforms required for EU accession, the party's appetite for Europe also waned due to the European Court of Human Rights' 2005 decision to uphold Turkey's ban on Islamic-style headscarves on college campuses. The AKP had hoped that Europe would help it recalibrate Turkey's powerful secular norms by making more permissible different manifestations of political Islam. The court's decision suggested, however, that Europe is as content with Turkish secularism as Turkey is. A symbolic sign of the AKP's loss of interest in the EU emerged when the AKP declared 2005 the "Year of Africa," opting to turn the country's attention to a different continent at a rather inopportune time.

In due course, the AKP dropped the reform process, allowing the state of reforms to deteriorate. As the government resorted to jailing critical journalists under the pretext that they were planning a coup, Turkey dropped 20 spots in the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index, from 102nd out of 175 countries in 2008 to 122nd last year. Moreover, the AKP used plot allegations -- most infamously in the "Ergenekon case" -- to target its political opponents in the media, military and academia.

Even when they aren't engaging in alleged coup plots, independent media appears to present an acute problem for the AKP. After Milliyet, a paper owned by the Dogan Media Group, an independent media group, reported alleged AKP links to an Islamist charity in Germany, the government slapped Dogan with a record \$3.3 billion tax fine, a sum that exceeds the company's net worth. It seems that when it comes to government-media relations, Turkey is becoming more like Russia than Europe under the tutelage of the AKP.

The AKP's rule has also dealt a blow to the cause of gender equality. In 1994, the percentage of women in executive civil service positions was 15 percent,

according to IRIS, an Ankara-based women's rights group. The number has since decreased to 11 percent. While 33 percent of all lawyers in Turkey are women, not a single woman exists among the nine top bureaucrats in the Turkish justice ministry. Contrast this with the large number of female jurists in the country's high courts, where judges are appointed by peers and not by the government. Similarly, almost half of the members of the Council of State, Turkey's top administrative court, are women.

But even this refuge of enlightened gender policy might soon come to an end. The AKP has recently pushed constitutional amendments that would enable it to appoint the majority of the judges to the high courts without a confirmation process. Female judges may no longer bother to apply. As Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan put it so delicately on 2008's World Women's Day, the role of women in Turkish society is not to have a career but "to make at least three babies each."

These developments legitimate Mr. Sarkozy's objections to Turkish aspirations to EU membership and in turn strengthen the popular impasse to Turkey's EU accession. The linkage does not end there, however. The more Mr. Sarkozy speaks out against Turkey's membership, the more Turks retaliate by turning against the EU and embracing the AKP's nontraditional foreign policy -- that is, the policy of shifting Turkey away from its traditional role as a country that is Western in political identity and Muslim only by religion. It is increasingly unlikely that the AKP will attempt to reverse this overall trajectory, as the party seems more than satisfied with Turkey firmly outside of the EU.

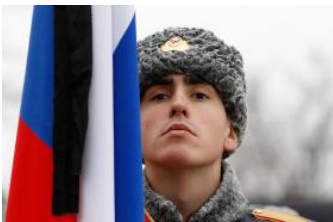
* This column originally appeared in Limes (Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica).

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