

## Who's Afraid of Turkey?

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Articles & Testimony

**T**urkey is starting to scare Americans, for good reason. There was the high-profile clash at Davos over the Palestinians, fraying Turkish ties to Israel. Then came the surprise uranium deal with Tehran, undermining Western pressure on Iran to come clean about its nuclear program. Now there's a new clash with Israel over Turkish support for the convoys challenging Israel's embargo on Gaza. But just as Turkey is starting to look more assertively pro-Islamist than ever, there are signs that a big internal shift may reshape Turkish politics and redirect its foreign policy back toward the West.

This would end a drift that began in 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP), rooted in the country's Islamist movement, came to power. It has grown more authoritarian, and anti-Western, ever since. The NGO that sponsored the Gaza flotilla has close ties to the AKP, has sponsored numerous fundraisers in the Istanbul convention center controlled by the AKP city government, and has been designated by the U.S. as part of an umbrella group of terrorist organizations. Now AKP leaders are pressing the U.S. for a more aggressive response.

But for the first time in years, the AKP faces a real challenge. Turkey's main opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP), lately has been a mere shadow of the secular force that once ruled the country and made it a staunch NATO ally. Now the resignation of CHP leader Deniz Baykal over an alleged sex-tape scandal has ushered in a new boss, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, a charismatic people's man who is committed to Western values. He might be the one to rebuild an effective opposition and redirect Turkish foreign policy toward the West.

Kilicdaroglu has already voiced support for Turkey's effort to join the European Union, which has stalled in part due to European resistance to admitting a Muslim member, but also due to the AKP's withering interest in the process since Ankara started membership talks in 2005. Kilicdaroglu has backed some of the government response to the latest Gaza incident -- it would be impossible for any Turkish politician not to, given that Turkish activists were killed -- but he could still bring change in the future.

Kilicdaroglu will have to recalibrate his party's commitment to the ideals of Kemal Ataturk, who founded modern Turkey as a secular state. This New Kemalism would recall Ataturk's 20th-century desire for Turkey to become European, making EU membership and realigning with the West top priorities while downplaying the AKP's rapprochement with Iran and Russia. There are signs that this is happening already, including Kilicdaroglu's encouragement of prominent pro-EU Turkish diplomats to join the CHP. New Kemalism would abandon the AKP's ideological sympathy with Iran in favor of a pragmatic nationalist view: a nuclear Iran is against Turkish interests.

Kilicdaroglu, nicknamed "Gandhi Kemal" for his humility, to which the Turks have taken a liking, is already changing the CHP, taking the party, the heir to a social-democratic politics, back to the working and middle classes. He is also beginning to make New Kemalism more attractive at home by keeping its liberal aspects while coming to terms with religious issues: the new party assembly includes both a record number of women and an imam.

The CHP needs to challenge the AKP's success at creating what Turks see as a forward-looking vision -- one that respects the nation's conservative social values and carves out a position of respect for Turkey within the transatlantic community. In recent years the CHP has defined itself mainly by saying no to the AKP, so the change in leadership presents an unprecedented opportunity -- Turkish leaders do not usually quit politics until they die -- to introduce New Kemalism. Can Kilicdaroglu win? For now the Gaza debacle is boosting the AKP's popularity, but the CHP has a solid base. Opinion polls suggest that 32 to 38 percent of Turks would never support the AKP. Kilicdaroglu's politics can expand this base. The AKP has won repeated elections since 2002 with strong support among lower-middle-class voters, Turkey's demographic plurality, thanks to its rhetoric of social justice laced with conservative overtones.

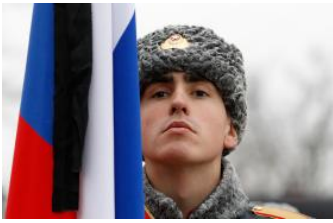
Kilicdaroglu's pro-working-class message will help him win over these voters. If Kilicdaroglu can advance New Kemalism as a pro-Western, social-democratic movement at peace with both secularism and religion, Ataturk's party might once again return to power in Turkey. It can't happen soon enough to change the dynamics of the Gaza crisis, but it can happen.

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