

As Turkey Pulls Away

Dec 5, 2009



Articles & Testimony

On December 7, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet with US President Barack Obama in Washington. The meeting follows Obama's April visit to Turkey when he reached out to the Turks to realign Ankara with the US after the tumultuous years of the Bush administration.

Despite Obama's efforts, Turkish foreign policy is drifting further away from the US. The cause of this is the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Ankara seeing the world very differently than the US administration. The AKP's foreign policy is shaped by "econo-Islamism," a doctrine blending business deals with a religio-political view of the world.

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has pursued rapprochement with Russia, Sudan and Iran, and has even gone so far as establishing ties with Hamas. In the West, this orientation of Turkish foreign policy had until recently been interpreted as neo-Ottomanist, i.e. a "secular" attempt to reassert itself in the Ottoman realm, to the benefit of the Euro-Atlantic community.

However, this perception has recently started to shift. For example, last April the AKP objected to Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's appointment as NATO's secretary-general, citing Rasmussen's handling of the "cartoon crisis" as offensive to Muslims. This is shocking especially since in February, the AKP city government of Istanbul had ran an anti-American, anti-Israeli, anti-Western and anti-Semitic cartoon exhibit in the city's downtown Taksim metro station.

As a former US ambassador to Turkey told me: "The Rasmussen and cartoon incidents are telling: The AKP sees itself as the tribune of the politically-defined and -charged Muslim world to the West, and not as an emissary of the West to the Muslims."

The AKP's econo-Islamist foreign policy empathizes not with Muslims, that would be quite normal. Rather the party chooses to align itself with Islamist and anti-Western regimes. This policy attitude surfaces lucidly if one compares the party's approach to Israel's Gaza war and to Sudan's Darfur campaign.

In 2008, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Erdogan chided the Israeli president for "knowing well how to kill people." Erdogan then returned to Ankara to host the Sudanese vice president. The AKP is not ticked when Islamists kill non-Muslims.

During the Gaza war, Erdogan denied that "Hamas's rockets are causing casualties in Israel." Nor is the party ticked when Islamists kill Muslims -- on November 8, Erdogan said: "I know that Sudanese leader [Omar] al-Bashir is not committing genocide in Darfur, because al-Bashir is a Muslim and Muslims do not commit genocide."

A recent UN report has documented that Bashir is responsible for killing 300,000 Sudanese citizens and the international court for war crimes has called for his arrest. Yet, the AKP stands for Bashir and his crimes against fellow Muslims. This is since the party is ticked only when Islamist regimes confront the West, siding with such regimes regardless of their nature. This viewpoint is Islamist and inherently anti-Western.

Subsequently, Turkey's ties with its traditional Western allies, including Washington have suffered. Turkey's relations with Europe have also deteriorated: Initially after 2002, the AKP aggressively pursued European Union accession, but since membership talks actually began in 2005, while French objections to Turkey's EU membership mounted, the party's energy for the union fizzled away because of a lack of interest by the AKP to fulfill Turkey's European destiny.

At the same time, Turkish-Israeli ties are checked by a religio-political view that deems Israel to be automatically wrong when it faces Muslims.

Last month, the AKP uninvited Israel to the Anatolian Eagle military exercise in Turkey, citing its "atrocities in Gaza" as the reason. Yet, days later, the AKP invited Damascus, whose Alawite minority regime persecutes its Sunni majority, to participate in joint military exercises.

The AKP's foreign policy favors Islamist and anti-Western regimes. Accordingly, the party has shied away from criticizing Iran's nuclear ambitions, invited Hamas leaders to Ankara and built close relations with Qatar. The party's axis with these actors came under the limelight during the 2008 Gaza war. Instead of joining Washington's moderate Arab allies, including Egypt and Kuwait to discuss an end to the conflict in January, Erdogan's officials met with leaders of Iran, Sudan and Qatar, upstaging the moderates.

In addition, growing Qatari investments in Turkey and trade with Syria are material factors that underpin the party's foreign policy.

One arm of the AKP's foreign policy has been to help pro-AKP businessmen get mega energy contracts and business deals in Sudan, Iran and Russia. When the AKP came to power, Russia was Turkey's eighth largest trading partner and the West dominated two-thirds of Turkish trade.

In 2008, the West's share of Turkish trade dropped to 50 percent, and Russia replaced Germany as Turkey's top trading partner. Personal ties between Vladimir Putin and Erdogan have buttressed rapprochement, transforming Turkish-Russian relations that have been marked by confrontation since the 15th century. Subsequently, during the 2008 Georgia-Russia war, Turkey sided with Russia when Moscow invaded Georgia.

Econo-Islamism is a far call from the traditional exclusively pro-Western orientation of Turkish foreign policy. Under this new foreign policy doctrine, Turkey will opt out of a NATO consensus on Iran, clash with the West on how to handle Hamas, build intimate relations with Russia and disagree with Washington and Brussels on Sudan. Econo-Islamism conflicts with the Obama administration's vision of a multi-confessional world. The AKP doctrine does not consider Turkey as being a part of Obama's world.

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