

A Trap for Muslims

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Articles & Testimony

How does one deal with and explain rising anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Israeli sentiments in Turkey? A dangerous tendency is to look into the historic roots of these phenomena and explain them as being hardwired in the Turkish polity, not as products of current politics. This is a trap that Turks must avoid at all costs for it bears the risk of casting Turks, and other Muslims as inherently anti-American, anti-Israeli, and anti-Semitic.

To be sure, there have been anti-Western instincts in Turkish nationalism, not unlike other post-Ottoman nationalisms. Turkey has had past episodes of anti-Americanism and even marginal cases of anti-Semitism. The country has also witnessed anti-Israeli sentiments. However, these phenomena were never grassroots movements. Furthermore, they were not politically sanctioned or mainstream. Turkey has been a home for Jews ever since Anatolia became Turkish. The Turks have historically supported strong ties with the United States. They also did not oppose intimate ties with Israel, which Turkey recognized in 1949.

Today, however, there is change on all fronts; a recent Infakto poll shows that 44 percent of Turks consider the United States the biggest threat to Turkey, while the number of people who have anti-Semitic views is rising dramatically. A 2008 Pew survey found that 76 percent of Turks surveyed had a negative view of Jews -- an increase from 49 percent in 2004.

So why are the Turks suddenly spiteful towards the United States and Israel, Americans and Jews? Anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism are surging in Turkey for the first time in modern Turkey; the government is sanctioning these phenomena, driving them towards the mainstream of political life. This combination of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism is not a coincidence. Islamist thinking on the matter easily allows for such sentiment: "The Jews are evil, and so is Israel; Jews run America, and therefore the United States is also evil."

Take, for instance, the billboards that Istanbul's AKP government put up during the Gaza war in Istanbul's mixed Muslim-Jewish neighborhoods. These oversized billboards depicted a burnt-out child's sneaker, with a sign saying "humanity has been slaughtered in Palestine" over it. Under the sneaker, in large print, the billboard quoted the Old Testament commandment "Thou shall not kill" and added "You cannot be the Children of Moses." What does the Gaza war have to do with Jewish law? It is not an accident that a day after these billboards appeared in Istanbul's cosmopolitan Nisantasi neighborhood, vigilantes distributed fliers calling for a boycott of Jewish businesses. The next day, Jewish businesses in the neighborhood took down their names.

The outrage sparked by the Gaza war has failed to subside. In early February 2009, the AKP city government of Istanbul opened a cartoon exhibit in the city's downtown Taksim Square metro station -- Taksim Square is to Istanbul what Times Square is to New York City -- which included cartoons depicting bloodthirsty Israelis killing Palestinians with American help. One such cartoon showed a satanic-looking Israeli soldier washing his hands with blood from a faucet labeled the United States. Each month, millions of Turks pass through the Taksim metro station -- a government-owned public service.

Unsurprisingly, such black propaganda is not without consequences. A sage once told me that a society is truly anti-Semitic when teachers say bad things about Jews in school. Last month, a group of Turkish schoolteachers distributed sweets in the Central Anatolian town of Kayseri to commemorate Hitler's blessed memory. During the Gaza war, Israelis, including Israeli teenagers who were visiting Turkey to play volleyball, were attacked. Shops plastered signs on their windows, saying that "Americans and Israelis may not enter." What's more, Turkish Jews felt physically threatened for the first time since they found refuge in the bosom of the Ottoman Empire.

All this has nothing to do with whatever historic causes one might seek for such developments. Popular anti-Semitism is driven in Turkey by the acts and rhetoric of the government. Analysts ought to follow Turkey's current politics in explaining the Turks' shifting political attitudes. If one fails to point out how anti-Americanism, anti-Israeli sentiments, and anti-Semitism are driven by the government, once such sentiments lay roots, we will have no other explanation but to say that anti-Americanism, anti-Israeli sentiments, and anti-Semitism are intrinsic to Turkish society and, God forbid, the Turks' religion, Islam.

Pundits, policymakers, and common Turks alike ought to think twice before they overlook Turkey's political transformation and turn to historicizing Turkey's current anti-American, anti-Israeli, and anti-Semitic stance. The surge of these sentiments since 2002 demonstrates that, when in power, Islamists can corrupt even the most liberal of Muslim societies. The singular example of a Muslim society that is friendly towards Jews and Americans risks disappearing if we do not point out the political nature of Turkey's current transformation. If we ignore the political forces changing Turkey today, others will blame the change on the Turks and Islam tomorrow.

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