

Surfacing Submarine

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Articles & Testimony

I am often asked these days why Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is so upset with Israel. "It's so dramatic" people say, adding: "Why did the AKP uninvite Israel to Anatolian Eagle" (a NATO air force exercise held in Turkey)? "Is this the beginning of the end of Turkish-Israeli ties that go back to 1949 just as Israel is most worried about Iran?"

The AKP's snub follows harsh anti-Israeli rhetoric by party leadership, and an incendiary television series on Turkey's publicly funded TV network that depicts Israelis as cold-blooded and evil. So people ask: "Why is the AKP doing all this now?" My answer is simple: The AKP is doing and saying what it believes: the party, rooted in Turkey's own Muslim Brotherhood movement, has always hated Israel, and now that the AKP is comfortably in charge in Turkey, it will oppose Israel with any means available as well as promote other aspects of the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood's agenda.

The AKP was born out of the Welfare Party (RP), the motherboard of Turkish Islamists since the 1980s. Islamism in Turkey, though traditionally nonviolent, possesses six virulent characteristics; it is anti-Western, anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli, anti-European, anti-democratic and holds anti-secular sentiments, all of which are adopted from the Muslim Brotherhood.

When RP came to power in a coalition government in 1996 it attempted to implement this Turkish Muslim Brotherhood agenda, but was opposed by a secular, pro-western bloc, which included various media outlets, opposition parties, NGOs, businesses and the military. When massive demonstrations and a well-coordinated public relations campaign brought the party down in 1997, the European Union and the United States stood aside.

The Islamists drew a valuable lesson from this experience as they rebranded themselves, turning away from the six-pronged Muslim Brotherhood agenda to become more likeable and gain popular support. The AKP emerged out of this rebranding in 2001 as it declared that it had jettisoned the six elements of the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood ideology.

In 2002, when the AKP came to power, the world and Turks alike celebrated the victory as a first instance of the Islamists' moderation. However, far from harboring a genuine desire to moderate, the Turkish Islamists simply caved to external pressures, including the courts, media outlets, businesses and the military, as well as the United States and EU, which forced the AKP to abandon the Muslim Brotherhood ideology.

Yet the AKP did not forget its roots: once in power, it followed a two-pronged strategy to eliminate the domestic and external pressures that drove the RP from power in 1997. The party promoted EU accession while simultaneously cracking down on internal checks and balances, and maintained good ties with the West while nurturing anti-Western sentiments at home.

In due course the party successfully neutered the domestic forces that had forced its predecessor to step down from power. It used legal loopholes to pass the media into the hands of its supporters, resulting in half of the Turkish media falling into the hands of pro-AKP businesses and the rest facing massive putative tax fines. Large, secular

Turkish businesses fear the AKP's financial police and tax audits, while judges and generals have been targeted in the Ergenekon case for allegedly planning a coup against the AKP government. Illegal and legal wiretaps are now common, justified as necessary for collecting evidence for the Ergenekon case. Whether there was actually a coup plot, Turkey's judges, opinion makers, generals, businessmen, political leaders and plain citizens are fearful of opposing the government because they worry that their private conversations will be wiretapped or they will be arrested for association with the alleged coup.

Just as it has nearly eliminated domestic checks, the AKP has also paralyzed external checks to its power. Although the party maintained amiable ties with Israel and the United States and even pushed for EU accession after coming to power, in reality the AKP's rhetoric has demonized the EU, US and Israel. The party has labeled US and Israeli policies as "genocidal" and bashed the West for "being immoral". Even though those who promoted the idea of the Islamists' moderation dismissed such rhetoric as harmless domestic politicking, the rhetoric has had devastating consequences: today, few in Turkey care for the West, most people oppose EU accession, many Turks hate America and almost no one likes Israel.

Fast forward to the Anatolian Eagle incident. After paralyzing domestic opposition and planting the seeds of anti-Western sentiments in Turkish society, the AKP now feels free from the checks and balances that have traditionally forced Turkey's Islamists to behave. If the AKP is a political submarine that has cruised underwater, spotted by its rhetorical periscope, now this submarine is surfacing: the party is re-embracing the ideology of the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood.

We are witnessing the Muslim's Brotherhood take on foreign policy, highlighted by its approach to Turkish-Israeli ties. After seven years of vehement anti-Israeli rhetoric, the Turkish public has now embraced the AKP's position against Israel and the party is comfortably chipping away at the foundations of Turkish-Israeli ties, something it has always wanted to do. Today, it is Israel; tomorrow it is EU accession and cooperation with the United States, for instance on Iran. At this stage, the US, the EU and Israel have little leverage and few allies left in Turkey, and AKP policies, promoting the agenda of the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood and countering the US, EU and Israel, will find little resistance and much support inside Turkey. Turkey's Muslim Brothers have played a smart game indeed, changing the color of their vessel, then sailing deep and surfacing only when the waters were calm and clear.

This piece was also published in BitterLemons International.

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