

In Love with Arab Islamists

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Articles & Testimony

For so long, I have argued that the AKP's foreign policy is Islamist. Well, I stand corrected: the AKP's foreign policy does not have a generic Islamist tinge; rather the party is infatuated with Arab Islamist causes.

In the past, Turkey's foreign policy makers were educated in Western or secular Turkish schools, spoke European languages, and looked to Europe, especially France, for political inspiration and confirmation of Turkey's Western and European identity. The infatuation of the secular and pro-Western Turks with Europe was powerful: they looked to Europe not only to build a society in the continent's mold, but to receive affirmation from the Europeans by following a pro-European foreign policy.

The AKP suggests an end to this trend, with a new infatuation. The party's political leadership is composed of people educated in Imam-Hatip schools in Turkey under non-secular curriculums. The Weltanschauung of the AKP elites is different than that of the secular Turkish elites. Some AKP leaders have degrees from universities in Arab and other Muslim countries. Most speak Arabic, and more importantly, the leadership looks towards the Arab countries for inspiration. Just as the secular Turkish elites sought European affirmation by following a pro-European foreign policy, the AKP elites seek Arab affirmation by following a pro-Arab foreign policy.

Due to the AKP's Islamist pedigree, this pro-Arab slant comes with a powerful Islamist tinge. In other words, the AKP favors Arab Islamist causes over secular ones. For instance, publicly, and behind close doors, the AKP sides with Islamist Hamas against the secular Palestinian Authority and Fatah. This is since the party feels close to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

Since 2002, Turkey has hosted many Hamas conferences in Istanbul. In the most recent meeting held in Istanbul in April, Turkey welcomed Rashid Gannushi, a prominent Tunisian Islamist leader who heads the outlawed and MB-affiliated Nahda movement in that country.

Furthermore, since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has developed close economic and political ties with the Islamist regimes in Sudan, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The same cannot be said of Turkish ties with secular and moderate Jordan, Tunisia, and Egypt. The AKP does not like all Arab causes and entities; rather it empathizes only with those Arab causes and entities that are Islamist.

The AKP's pro-Arab Islamist slant is an infatuation, in a way mirroring the secular Turks' infatuation with Europe.

For decades, secular Turks put Turkey through painful tests to prove the country's Europeanness.

For instance, Turkish soccer teams joined European competitions, losing miserably to powerful European teams. The Turks could have competed against the less professional Middle Eastern teams in Asian competitions, but this would have meant that Turkey was not European. Turkish soccer teams have improved recently, winning European cups.

The euphoria one witnesses every time Turkey wins a European championship is really joy over the validation of Turkey's European identity.

In conversations about Turkey's pro-Arab tilt in foreign policy, the AKP leadership suggests that these policies are "bearing fruit because Turkey is popular on the Arab street and since the Arabs now like Turkey." However, being popular on the Arab street is not necessarily an asset for Turkey, since in autocracies popularity on the street does not translate into soft power in the capitals.

Still, the AKP's desire to be liked by the Arabs drives its pro-Arab Islamist foreign policy. Being popular on the Arab street is for the AKP what winning a European soccer cup is for the secular Turks.

In short, the AKP has a love affair with Arab Islamists and will take foreign policy steps to nurture this constituency's sympathy, even if such steps do not necessarily serve Turkey's interests.

For decades, pro-Western Turks thought that they were secular French -- they were not. Now the AKP elites think they are Islamist Arabs -- they are not.

Turkey's vain love affairs with foreign role models continue.

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