

The Battle for Turkey's Soul: Elites vs. the West

May 13, 2009



Articles & Testimony

Turkey is an elite project; historically, large elite groups, i.e., mega elites constituting sizeable portions of the society, have led Turkey toward their own societal values and foreign policy choices. This was the case during the Ottoman Empire, the Republican era, and, today, with the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP.

In the Ottoman period, the dynasty and bureaucracy pulled the empire westward, adopting a constitution and joining the Concert of Europe in due course. After 1923, the Kemalists put Turkey on the path of a secular European state, promoting gender equality, allying with the United States in the Cold War, and making a bid for European Union membership.

The AKP represents Turkey's new mega elite; it is supported by a large business community, directs domestic intelligence, and controls the executive and legislative branches. Former AKP member Abdullah Gul is now the Turkish president with the power to appoint judges to the high courts. In addition, around half of the media is now owned by pro-AKP businesses.

As the new mega elite, the AKP is shaping Turkish society in its own image. Domestically, the party is promoting social conservatism through administrative measures.

News stories often define the AKP as a movement that represents pious Muslims against religion-suppressing Kemalists. Turkey is more nuanced than this black and white picture. In fall 2008, I met a young woman in Istanbul. This woman, who had a distinctly Muslim name -- let's call her Ayse -- had just graduated from college with a degree in computer science. Ayse, who hailed from Istanbul and was born to a Greek-Orthodox father and a Muslim mother, considered herself both Christian and Muslim in Istanbul's urban tradition. After getting an IT degree in 2008, Ayse applied to an AKP-run borough of Istanbul city government for a job. Ayse's resume is impressive, and the municipality invited her for an interview. At the end of the interview, the AKP officials told Ayse that they liked her and would offer her a job if she would wear an Islamic-style headscarf to work.

Ayse responded, "I am Muslim and a Christian." The AKP officials told her emphatically, "We do not want to you convert, just cover your head."

The AKP's social vision is not about faith or religiosity; rather it is about a veneer of one-size-fits-all social conservatism that should blanket Turkish society. Therefore, it is not religiosity that is on the rise in Turkey -- attending mosque prayers during 2008 in Turkey, I realized that the number of people praying had not increased since the 1990s when I lived in Istanbul -- but rather it is government-infused social conservatism that is growing. Indications of social conservatism, such as disdain for alcohol and women in the workforce, or women wearing headscarves, are used as benchmarks to obtain government appointments, promotions and contracts. Social conservatism, however, is not in itself the problem, and a conservative Turkey can certainly be European.

The problem is that a government-led project of this type is incompatible with the idea of a liberal democracy. And given Turkey's nature as an elite project, AKP-led social conservatism is reshaping Turkish society. The new mega elite is also reshaping Turkish foreign policy.

In the past, Turkey's foreign policy paradigm centered on the promotion of national interests vested in the West. The Turks are a fence-sitting people between the West and the "Muslim world." What the Turks hear about the West and the "Muslim world" can shape their foreign policy views. In the past, the Turks supported a pro-Western foreign policy precisely because the Turkish leaders and pundits explained to the public that the country belonged to the West and that its interests were in the West.

Today, this view is shifting. The new mega elites' foreign policy paradigm is different than those in the past: The AKP promotes a civilizational view of the world that sees a dichotomy between Muslims who "never do anything wrong" vs. others who are "always wrong" should they confront the Muslims. This civilizational view surfaces lucidly when one compares the AKP's attitude to Israel's Gaza war to Sudan's Darfur campaign. In 2008, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan chided the Israeli president for killing Gazans. Erdogan then returned to Ankara to host the Sudanese vice president. The AKP is upset not when Muslims kill Muslims, as in Darfur; or when Muslims kill non-Muslims -- Erdogan denied that "Hamas' rockets are causing casualties in Israel during the Gaza War." The AKP cares only when non-Muslims kill Muslims.

This viewpoint is inherently anti-Western. Promoted by pundits and opinion-makers close to the AKP, this new anti-Western and anti-U.S. paradigm is molding Turkish hearts and minds, and is becoming pervasive across Turkish society.

The AKP shapes anti-Western opinion and in turn reacts to it, such as by hosting a pro-Hamas Muslim Brotherhood conference in Istanbul after the Gaza war. This vicious cycle will ultimately cost the United States because Turkey is a democracy in which public opinion matters. Sooner or later, the anti-Western views will cripple Turkey's foreign policy partnership with the West, including the United States.

The Euro-Atlantic community's only way to prevent Turkey's slide away from the West and liberal democratic values is to treat Turkey as a Western country, emphasizing NATO's role in Turkey's ties with the West and advancing Ankara's stalled EU accession talks. During the Cold War, NATO helped make Turkey Western. Today, Turkish foreign policy can remain Western only if it is tied to NATO. The EU is the second anchor tying Turkey to the West. Since Sept. 11, Turkey has been caught between Europe and the "Muslim world." If Turkey's prospects to join the EU are exhausted, the country will inevitably fold into the "Muslim world."

Never before has Turkey been at such a crossroads, with its elites and the West pulling the country in different directions.

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