

## The AKP's Foreign Policy: The Misnomer of "Neo-Ottomanism"

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Articles & Testimony

Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey has cultivated close ties with Iran, Syria, Sudan, the Gulf Countries, as well as with Russia. In the West, the reorientation of Turkish foreign policy had until recently generally been interpreted as neo-Ottomanist, i.e., a benevolent attempt by Turkey to assert itself in the Ottoman realm, which was assumed to be to the benefit of the Euro-Atlantic community as well. However, a closer look reveals that Turkey is asserting itself exclusively in the Muslim Middle East, while ignoring other areas of the Ottoman realm. What is more, under the AKP, Turkish foreign policy empathizes increasingly not with the West, but with Russia and Iran, and especially with Arab Islamist causes.

### Background

The AKP has pursued rapprochement with Sudan, Syria, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, and has regular contacts with Hamas and Hezbollah. Meanwhile, ties with Turkey's traditional allies have cooled. The AKP determinedly pursued European Union (EU) accession, but since membership talks actually began in 2005, the party's energy for the EU has fizzled away. A public that is increasingly critical of the relationship with Israel checks Turkish ties with Israel. After seven years of AKP rule, Turkey maintains as close ties with Tehran, Damascus, and Moscow as it does with Washington, Tel Aviv and Brussels. This picture represents a departure from the traditional, exclusively pro-Western orientation of Turkish foreign policy. The question, then, is what drives Turkish foreign policy in the AKP age?

The AKP's foreign policy is not neo-Ottoman, in the sense that suggests secular imperial ambitions or status as a regional power. The AKP does not assert Turkey's weight equally in the areas that were under Ottoman rule, namely the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East. It should be noted that the late Ottoman sultan Abdulhamid II (who ruled between 1876 and 1909) did seek to reassert the legitimacy of imperial rule on the basis of Islam. However, while Abdulhamid's pan-Islamism focused on all Muslims, the AKP's focus seems to be the Arab world. What is more, the AKP is asserting Turkish power in the Middle East with a slant towards Islamist Arab actors in the Middle East, and to a lesser extent towards Iran.

The party's use of diplomacy is evocative: A study of high-level visits by AKP officials to the Middle East, Balkans and Caucasus reveals that the party focuses asymmetrically on Islamist Arab countries and Iran, while it ignores Israel, the Balkans and the Caucasus. Between November 2002 and April 2009, the Turkish foreign minister made at least eight visits to Iran and Syria, while paying only one visit to Azerbaijan, a Turkic nation once considered to be the closest country to Turkey, and one to Georgia, despite the fact that after Georgia's independence, Turkey had acted as a mentor for that nation. Similarly, between November 2002 and April 2009, the Turkish prime minister made at least seven visits to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, while paying only two to Greece and Bulgaria, Turkey's two immediate European and Balkan neighbors.

The AKP has actively focused on Islamist and Arab Islamist affairs. It has shied away from criticizing Iran's nuclear ambitions, invited Hamas leaders to Ankara, maintained ties with Hezbollah, and built close commercial and political relations with Qatar. The AKP's axis with these actors came under the limelight during and after the Gaza War. Instead of joining Washington's moderate Arab allies, including Egypt and Jordan, who gathered on January 19 in Kuwait to discuss an end to the Gaza conflict, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's officials met three days earlier with leaders of Iran, Syria and Sudan in Qatar, effectively upstaging the moderates. Meanwhile, the AKP does not seem to care for the "Ottomanness" of the Caucasus. During the Georgia-Russia war, Turkey desisted from siding with Georgia, a former Ottoman-controlled country and close ally when it was invaded by Russia, the chief enemy of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, the AKP managed to keep Russia satisfied, while punishing Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili for what Turkey's ruling party views as his emphasis on Christianity in Georgian affairs.

Neither is the AKP's foreign policy neo-Ottoman with regard to Iran. Turkish-Iranian relations have been marked by a stalemate since a peace treaty in the 17th century. The Turks had always been wary of Iran and of its nuclear ambitions, but in November 2008, Erdogan told a Washington crowd that "countries that oppose Iran's nuclear weapons should themselves not have nuclear weapons." However, it should be noted that at least some in the AKP leadership still view Iran with suspicion due to its Shiite nature.

A Turkish foreign policy rooted in Ottoman grandeur would have required that the AKP to adopt an equidistance toward Jews and Muslims, and toward Israelis and Arabs in the Middle East. This has not been the case. Between 2002 and 2008, the Turkish foreign minister made five trips to Syria, while visiting Israel only once. During the Gaza War Erdogan suggested that Israel "had violated the ceasefire with Hamas" and claimed that "Hamas' rockets are not causing any casualties in Israel." Erdogan questioned the validity of Israel's U.N. seat, while stating that he wants to represent Hamas on international platforms.

When Saudi King Abdullah visited Ankara in 2007, Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul met the king at the Ankara airport and then visited him at night in his hotel room, in both cases violating diplomatic protocol. The Ottoman sultans would turn in their graves given the excessive attention being paid to the Saudi King, the protector and promoter of Islamist Wahhabi thought. When Wahhabism rose in Arabia in the nineteenth century, spearheaded by the Saud family, Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II sent troops to crush this fundamentalist "heresy" and defeat the Saudi house. After the Ottoman forces captured Abdullah, the great grandfather of today's King Abdullah, they brought him to the Turkish capital where he was beheaded.

### Implications

Rather than being neo-Ottoman in a "secular" sense, the AKP's foreign policy is asymmetrically focused on Arab Islamists in particular and the Muslim Middle

East more generally. It is pro-Hamas, pro-Syria, pro-Hezbollah, pro-Qatar, pro-Saudi. The AKP views the world as composed of religious blocks, and this disposition colors its views of the Middle East and the world. The subsequent anti-Western, anti-U.S., and anti-Israeli view has become a new paradigm promoted by pundits, think tanks, and newspapers close to the AKP. In a recent incident along this line, the AKP objected to the appointment of Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen as NATO's secretary general on grounds that his behavior was "offensive to the Muslim world" during the 2006 cartoon crisis. This has caused many in the Euro-Atlantic community to conclude that instead of looking after the interests of the Euro-Atlantic community, Turkey is looking after the interests of the "Muslim world."

A comparison of the AKP's reactions to Gaza and Darfur reveals the party's religion-based take on international affairs. At the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in Davos, Erdogan chided Israeli president Shimon Peres for "knowing well how to kill people." On his return to Ankara, Erdogan hosted the vice-president of Sudan, many of whose citizens live in camps to avoid government persecution, creating the impression that the Turkish government is less sensitive to persecution carried out by Muslim regimes, and cares mainly when Muslims are targeted by non-Muslims.

Arab Islamist causes play a major role in shaping the AKP's views of the Middle East. For decades, Turkey's foreign policy makers were educated in Western or secular Turkish schools, spoke European languages, and looked to Europe for political inspiration and confirmation of Turkey's Western identity. The AKP represents a rupture with that tradition. The party's political leadership is composed of people educated in religious schools under a non-secular curriculum. Leaders hold degrees from universities in Arab and other Muslim countries. Most speak Arabic, and more importantly, the leadership looks at the Arab countries for inspiration and affirmation. This orientation drives the AKP's political love affair with Arab Islamists.

Money also shapes the AKP's foreign policy. Growing Qatari investments in Turkey, oil deals in Sudan and trade with Syria are material factors that underpin the Turkish-Arab rapprochement. Money also fuels Turkey's relations with Russia. When the AKP came to power, Russia was Turkey's eight-largest trading partner and the OECD had come to dominate two thirds of Turkish trade. In 2008, the combined U.S./European share of Turkish trade dropped to 50 percent for the first time, and Russia replaced Germany as Turkey's top trading partner. Warm personal relations between Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan have buttressed the rapprochement, transforming Turkish-Russian relations -- which have been marked by confrontation since the fifteenth century -- beyond recognition. While this improvement of relations is a good thing, the problem is that the AKP has taken an uncritical view of Russian foreign policy. It is telling that although the Turkish government reacted harshly to Israel's warfare in Gaza, it shied away from criticizing Russia when that country bombed Georgia.

#### Conclusions

The AKP's foreign policy has a weakness for Arab Islamists and their causes. The policy shows empathy towards Middle East Muslims and Islamists, though the same empathy is missing towards non-Muslims and non-Middle Eastern issues. Business deals play an important role in sustaining the stronger ties that Turkey is developing with Russia, the Persian Gulf states, Sudan, and Iran. Therefore, Neo-Ottomanism appears to be a misnomer for the AKP's foreign policy. Rather than secular Ottoman instincts, it is a religious view of the world and financial interest that seem to be shaping the AKP's foreign policy. A better word to describe it would be "Econo-Islamist."

The AKP's Econo-Islamist foreign policy orientation has turned Turkey into a country which has as good, and sometimes even friendlier, relations with Iran, Russia, Syria, Sudan, Hamas, Hezbollah, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as it enjoys with the United States, the EU, and Israel. Ankara will likely opt out of a NATO consensus on Iran, clash with the United States on how to handle Hamas and Hezbollah, and disagree with the EU and the U.S. on Russia. A truly and comprehensively neo-Ottoman reorientation of Turkish foreign policy would, on the other hand, necessarily imply a welcome departure from the AKP's current policies.

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