

## In the Name of Islam:

### A Liberal Appeal

Mar 30, 2009



Articles & Testimony

**A** trap awaits Turkey analysts seeking to explain rising anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism in Turkey. There is a tendency to look into the historic roots of both phenomena and to explain both as hardwired in the Turkish polity, not as products of current politics.

To be sure, there are anti-Western instincts in Turkish nationalism, not unlike most post-Ottoman nationalisms. Turkey has had past episodes of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism as well. However, these phenomena were never grassroots movements and never politically sanctioned. Moreover, 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, though, this is no longer the case, as the Turks view the United States as the country's chief enemy. A recent poll shows that 44 percent of the Turks consider the United States the biggest threat to Turkey. And the number of people in the country who have anti-Semitic views is rising dramatically. In 2004, 49 percent of the Turks said they did not want a Jewish neighbor; in 2009, this number climbed to 76 percent.

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 because the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government sanctions both phenomena. This combination of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism is not a coincidence. The Islamist thinking is as follows: The Jews are evil, they run America, and therefore America is 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 is 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 on earth does the Gaza war have to do with Jewish law? Is it 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? Or that 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, the AKP 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 many cartoons depicting bloodthirsty Israelis killing Palestinians with American help, such as one in which a satanic-looking Israeli soldier with white pupils washes the blood on his hands of 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 is 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 of the AKP government -- and that is a fact. Analysts should follow Turkey's current politics closely in explaining the Turks' shifting political attitudes. If we fail to point out how anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism are spiked up by the AKP, once such sentiments lay roots, we will have no other explanation but to say that anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism are intrinsic to Turkish society and, god forbid, the Turks' religion, Islam.

I call on fellow liberals to think twice before they bypass Turkey's political transformation and turn to historicizing anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism in Turkey. The surge of these sentiments since 2002 demonstrates that, when in power, Islamists can corrupt even the most liberal of the Muslim societies. The singular example of a Muslim society that is friendly towards Jews and Americans risks disappearing in front of our eyes 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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