

Turkey's Turn from the West

Feb 2, 2009



Articles & Testimony

Turkey is a special Muslim country. Of the more than 50 majority-Muslim nations, it is the only one that is a NATO ally, is in accession talks with the European Union, is a liberal democracy and has normal relations with Israel. Under its current government by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), however, Turkey is losing these special qualities. Liberal political trends are disappearing, E.U. accession talks have stalled, ties with anti-Western states such as Iran are improving and relations with Israel are deteriorating. On Thursday, for example, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan walked out of a panel at Davos, Switzerland, after chiding Israeli President Shimon Peres for "killing people." If Turkey fails in these areas or wavers in its commitment to transatlantic structures such as NATO, it cannot expect to be President Obama's favorite Muslim country.

Consider the domestic situation in Turkey and its effect on relations with the European Union. Although Turkey started accession talks, that train has come to a halt. French objections to Turkish membership slowed the process, but the impact of the AKP's slide from liberal values cannot be ignored. After six years of AKP rule, the people of Turkey are less free and less equal, as various news and other reports on media freedom and gender equality show. In April 2007, for instance, the AKP passed an Internet law that has led to a ban on YouTube, making Turkey the only European country to shut down access to the popular site. On the U.N. Development Program's gender-empowerment index, Turkey has slipped to 90th from 63rd in 2002, the year the AKP came to power, putting it behind even Saudi Arabia. It is difficult to take seriously the AKP's claim to be a liberal party when Saudi women are considered more politically, economically and socially empowered than Turkish women.

Then there is foreign policy. Take Turkey's status as a NATO ally of the United States: Ankara's rapprochement with Tehran has gone so far since 2002 that it is doubtful whether Turkey would side with the United States in dealing with the issue of a nuclear Iran. In December, Erdogan told a Washington crowd that "countries that oppose Iran's nuclear weapons should themselves not have nuclear weapons."

The AKP's commitment to U.S. positions is even weaker on other issues, including Hamas. During the recent Israeli operations in Gaza, Erdogan questioned the validity of Israel's U.N. seat while saying that he wants to represent Hamas on international platforms. Three days before moderate Arab allies of Washington, including Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, gathered on Jan. 19 in Kuwait to discuss an end to the Gaza conflict, Erdogan's officials met with Iran, Syria and Sudan in Qatar, effectively upstaging the moderates. Amazingly, Turkey is now taking a harder line on the Arab-Israeli conflict than even Saudi Arabia.

For years, Turkey has had normal relations with Israel, including strong military, tourist, and cultural and commercial ties. The Turks did not emphasize religion or ideology in their relationship with the Jewish state, so Israelis felt comfortable visiting, doing business and vacationing in Turkey. But Erdogan's recent anti-Israeli statements -- he even suggested that God would punish Israel -- have made normal relations a thing of the past. On Jan. 4, 200,000 Turks turned out in freezing rain in Istanbul to wish death to Israel; on Jan. 7, an Israeli girls' volleyball team was attacked by a Turkish audience chanting, "Muslim policemen, bring us the Jews, so we can slaughter them."

Emerging anti-Semitism also challenges Turkey's special status. Anti-Semitism is not hard-wired into Turkish society -- rather its seeds are being spread by the political leadership. Erdogan has pumped up such sentiments by suggesting Jewish culpability for the conflict in Gaza and alleging that Jewish-controlled media outlets were misrepresenting the facts. Moreover, on Jan. 6, while demanding remorse for Israel's Gaza operations, Erdogan said to Turkish Jews, "Did we not accept you in the Ottoman Empire?" Turkey's tiny, well-integrated Jewish community is being threatened: Jewish businesses are being boycotted, and instances of violence have been reported. These are shameful developments in a land that has provided a home for Jews since 1492, when the Ottomans opened their arms to Jewish people fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. The Ottoman sultans must be spinning in their graves.

The erosion of Turkey's liberalism under the AKP is alienating Turkey from the West. If Turkish foreign policy is based on solidarity with Islamist regimes or causes, Ankara cannot hope to be considered a serious NATO ally. Likewise, if the AKP discriminates against women, forgoes normal relations with Israel, curbs media freedoms or loses interest in joining Europe, it will hardly endear itself to the United States. And if Erdogan's AKP keeps serving a menu of illiberalism at home and religion in foreign policy, Turkey will no longer be special -- and that would be unfortunate.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at The Washington Institute, and author of [Islam Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who Is a Turk? \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=262\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=262) ❖

Washington Post

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)