

Is Turkey Still a Western Ally?

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Articles & Testimony

I spent part of 2008 in Turkey to figure out whether Ankara could still be considered a Western ally. That it's necessary to raise this question at all is an indication of how far the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) has isolated the country from its traditional partners.

For years Turkish foreign policy was driven by shared Western values, including democracy, membership to institutions like NATO and a sense of common destiny with Europe and the U.S. Since the AKP assumed power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy is increasingly driven by two new factors: religion and money.

Over the past year, the neo-Islamist AKP government has hosted a series of anti-Western leaders, including the presidents of Iran and Sudan, with whom Ankara seeks closer relations. At the same time, Turkey has ratcheted up its verbal attacks on its traditional Western allies, especially Israel. While the AKP seems to mirror Western policies toward such countries as Sudan, Iran or Russia, it fosters intimate ties with these governments.

Last July in Istanbul, for example, I witnessed Turkish joy over the capture of Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, the "butcher of Bosnia" who was indicted for genocide at The Hague tribunal. Just days later, however, the AKP welcomed Omar Al-Bashir, the even bigger butcher of Darfur. Ironically, the visit of the Sudanese president to Turkey coincided with The Hague court's prosecutor request that Mr. Al-Bashir be arrested for committing genocide in Darfur.

Yet President Al-Bashir received a warm welcome in Turkey, where he alleged that his government "had restored peace to Darfur," and defended the implementation of Shariah law in resolving the Darfur conflict. The AKP, the governing party of a secular state, did not challenge these statements. Instead, it chose to discuss oil investments in Sudan.

Later on in August, the AKP welcomed Iran's president to Istanbul. Turkey officially stands against Iran's nuclear project. But the AKP embraced Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, shutting down Istanbul's busy beltway for his travel comfort. In another favor to Mr. Ahmadinejad, the AKP departed from the tradition of having visiting Muslim heads of state pray in the isolated Dolmabahce Mosque which has served as Istanbul's protocol mosque. Instead, the government allowed him to pray in the central Blue Mosque with thousands of other worshippers, whereupon he put on an anti-American and anti-Israeli show which I had the displeasure of witnessing after attending Friday prayers there.

The Iranian leader left Istanbul happy, with a security cooperation treaty under one arm and a draft treaty for Turkish investments in Iranian gas fields under the other -- the latter in violation of Western financial sanctions against Tehran. Turkish media reported that U.S. pressure prevented the investment treaty from being finalized. Nevertheless, in November Turkey's energy minister visited Tehran for further discussions on energy deals.

The AKP empathizes with the Islamist regime in Sudan -- which it sees as a victim of the West -- and with the mullahs in Iran because it sees Turkey in religious communion with these states. In March 2006, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan addressed an Arab League summit in Khartoum, saying, "the West is using terrorism to sell us

weapons." It appears that Mr. Erdogan has finally answered the question of where Turkey belongs -- and that in his opinion, it's not with the West. On Iran, Mr. Erdogan told a Washington crowd on Nov. 14 that the AKP's policy is that "countries that oppose Iran's nuclear weapons should themselves not have nuclear weapons."

At the same time, the Iranians know how to exploit Turkey's security concerns. Ankara is upset about insufficient U.S. and European assistance against the terror infrastructure of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq and Western Europe, respectively. Tehran courts Turkish hearts and minds by bombing PKK camps in Iraq and by providing Turkey with intelligence support against the PKK. Financial instincts cement this religious sympathy. As polls show that Turks increasingly value Iran's friendship, energy and other cooperation projects with Iran will go down well in Turkey.

Energy politics also bring Ankara closer to Moscow. Only days after the U.S. condemned Russia's invasion of Georgia, calling for Moscow's isolation, the AKP invited Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Ankara for consultations.

In 2002, Russia was Turkey's sixth-biggest trading partner. Bilateral commerce has skyrocketed since then, turning Russia into Turkey's top trading partner in the first half of 2008. Accordingly, few Turks question the close ties with Moscow, and realists point out that Turkey depends on Russia for two-thirds of its gas.

Last but not least, Israel has become Mr. Erdogan's sandbag while Hamas sits in his heart. Turkey has long had warm ties to the Jewish state, since Turks did not wear ideology or religion on their sleeves in their relationship with Israel. But under the AKP, those relations are getting frostier. The conflict in Gaza has given the AKP an excuse to bring Turkish-Israeli relations to their lowest level in decades. Shortly after Jerusalem launched its offensive, Mr. Erdogan started a disingenuous initiative to "end the war in Gaza," traveling to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Egypt -- but not to Israel.

Mr. Erdogan's rhetoric, meanwhile, has reached Islamist fever pitch. Earlier this month he suggested that "Allah would punish Israel" for attacking Hamas, and that Jerusalem's actions would lead to its own "destruction." On Jan. 16, he questioned whether the Jewish state should still be allowed in the U.N. While accusing Israel of deliberately attacking civilians, Mr. Erdogan claimed that "Hamas's rockets are not causing any casualties in Israel."

His attacks worked. After Mr. Erdogan bashed Israel almost daily on national TV since the beginning of the operations in Gaza, 200,000 Turks showed up on Jan. 4 in the freezing rain in Istanbul, calling for the "death" of the Jewish state. Pro-AKP papers, meanwhile, question Turkey's military cooperation with Israel.

Now, Turkey's tiny and well-integrated Jewish community feels physically threatened for the first time since 1492, when it found safe haven in the Ottoman Empire after fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. There have been threats of violence against Jews and, even more shocking, banners have been plastered on Jewish-owned businesses, asking people to boycott them.

U.S. president Barack Obama and the European Union face a challenge in Turkey. The country's messy foreign policy is a harbinger of things to come. Under the AKP, Turkey will increasingly side with its radical, anti-Western neighbors, even if it remains committed, at least verbally, to the West. I hate to say it, but this is not your mother's Turkey.

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