

## Islamists in Charge

Aug 18, 2006



Articles & Testimony

**R**ead (<http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=52294>) the Turkish Daily News editorial response to this article.

Something is changing in the Turks' sense of who they are. You hear it from cab drivers or columnists, old friends and fresh acquaintances. For a long time, the Turks put their Turkish identity first, snubbing their Muslim neighborhood. Now they're acting like members of the Muslim umma.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which assumed power in November 2002, is driving this change. Rooted in Turkey's Islamist opposition, the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been widening the wedges between Turkey and the West, while building bridges with the Muslim Middle East. If anyone had doubts about the AKP's Islamism, the proof is in the party's foreign-policy pudding.

Since the AKP took over, Turkish attitudes toward the U.S. have soured significantly. Four years of harsh criticism of American foreign policy in the Middle East -- last year's U.S. military incursions into Fallujah, for example, were officially a "genocide" in Turkey -- has created what could be a permanent dent in public opinion. Whereas in the pre-Erdogan period typically more than half the Turks expressed favorable views of the U.S., a Pew Center survey last month showed that only 12 percent of Turks view America positively. In that study, the U.S. gets lower marks in Turkey than in Egypt or Jordan.

Some of the blame lies with Washington. American unwillingness to take action against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq is a source of frustration. Lately, Turkish casualties resulting from PKK attacks have been mounting at a rate close to that experienced by U.S. forces in Iraq. The civilian carnage in Iraq itself has added to the frustration.

But then, there is something peculiar about anti-Americanism in Turkey under the AKP. Before them, the Turks were America's best friends in the Muslim world. The current government's alternative is the Muslim Middle East.

The AKP is also alienating Turkey's other traditional ally in the region, Israel. A good example came earlier this year when Mr. Erdogan met with the leader of Hamas's military wing, Khaled Mashaal, in Ankara, despite criticism from the West and pro-Western Turks.

The AKP has continued to defend the visit and keep contacts with Mr. Mashaal and generally oppose Western efforts to isolate Hamas. The party has an intense and bizarre interest in all "Muslim causes." Last month, Mr. Erdogan lambasted Israel for trying to "wipe out the Palestinians" in Lebanon. On the same day, a PKK terror attack killed five Turkish soldiers. But Mr. Erdogan, who failed to mention the PKK in his speech, seems more interested in what happens to Hezbollah than to Turkish soldiers. Nor does he dwell upon the parallels between the PKK and Hezbollah, two terrorist groups that violate international borders (the first Turkey from northern Iraq, the second Israel from southern Lebanon). His foreign policy gives the impression that Muslim causes are more important than Turkish ones.

Mr. Erdogan's change of tone on the Mideast isn't without consequences. The media have run virulently anti-Semitic

articles -- a dreadful development in a country that has prided itself on saving Jews who fled the Spanish Inquisition as well as the Nazis. A recent anti-Israel demonstration in Istanbul attracted around 100,000 people. Before the AKP, anti-Israeli protests would have drawn just a few hundred die-hard jihadists.

The AKP's heart lies in the Muslim world. Analysts have credibly suggested that the party is linked to the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) movement in the Arab world. Whereas Egypt and Jordan, which consider the Ikhwan a serious internal threat, would not touch the new Hamas government with a 10-foot pole, the AKP courts the Palestinian extension of the Ikhwan.

If Islamist ideology constitutes one part of the AKP's foreign-policy calculus, domestic aspirations are another. The AKP's conundrum is that it is not supported by a majority of Turks, and the party has used a populist foreign policy that bashes the West to boost its domestic standing.

This is working: Not only are Turkish attitudes toward the U.S. spoiling, but the AKP now draws broad support for its foreign policy. If Turks think of themselves as Muslims first in the foreign-policy arena, then one day they'll think of themselves as Muslims in the domestic one. A telltale sign of the growth of Islamist sentiments is the surge in Islamist media. In the last four years, Islamist newspapers have boomed in Turkey. Combined circulation figures for the Islamist press in Turkey have almost tripled to more than 1.1 million today from 441,200 in 2001.

The AKP shows that, once in government, Islamist parties bring about change in unexpected ways. The party's foreign policy is scratching away the Turks' sense of national identity, while infusing a strong sense of Muslim nationalism into Turkish society instead. Whether this transformation continues after elections in 2007 will depend on whether secular, Western-minded Turks, long unable to provide a captivating political message, will successfully challenge the AKP. If not, a second AKP government might well turn Turkey into an unrecognizable country -- somehow democratic, superficially secular, and definitely not Western.

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