

# AKP'S DOMESTICALLY-DRIVEN FOREIGN POLICY

*AKP (the Justice and Development Party) adeptly uses foreign policy to advance its domestic drive for power. It favors Muslim solidarity, muscular nationalism, and mercantilism to outflank more Islamist and nationalist political opponents. And it favors them even when the choice puts Turkey at odds with the United States, a NATO ally, and the European Union, which it officially aspires to join. These preferences are evident in policies toward Turkey's Arab neighbors and Iran and toward Israel, Cyprus, and Armenia. Recognizing the political motivations for AKP's foreign policies better might enable Western governments to rise to the challenges they pose.*

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**I**t is axiomatic that the goal of political parties is to win elections and then to stay in power. With Turkey's June 2011 national elections approaching, it is timely to observe how, with respect to the ruling Justice and Development Party, all politics is not local. Rather, foreign policy issues have played a pivotal role in the AKP's electoral calculations.

Since the AKP took office in 2002, it has shrewdly used an assertive foreign policy to enhance Turkey's status as an actor and power on the world stage in ways that have enabled the party to consolidate power at home. A strong affinity for "Muslim" causes, evocation of muscular nationalist pride, and active mercantilism are the dominant foreign policy themes that have benefited AKP's domestic power drive the most. These themes often overlap and at times displace significant foreign policy concerns that some believe also ought be in Turkey's interest. They also reinforce a domestic agenda that has sought to normalize university matriculation of religious school students, allow women to wear the turban in more public venues, and sidetracked the party's own democratization initiative for Kurdish rights. Despite Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's boasts, his achievements in the international arena have been mixed, minimal, or none although they have greatly benefited his party's popularity at home.

AKP officials and some analysts maintain that changes in Turkey's foreign policy simply result from the country's increased democratization and are responsive to public demands. Yet, party leaders do not just echo the sentiments of their followers. They take a decidedly proactive role in shaping those impressions for domestic political reasons. Elements in the media that party supporters control assist this undertaking.

### ***"Muslim" Solidarity***

Some foreign policy issues might loosely be described as "Muslim" causes because they resonate with the AKP's core constituency of devout Turks and the party has emphasized them in some instances to outflank Islamist parties on its right, i.e., the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, or SP) under resurrected leader Necmettin Erbakan and the newly formed People's Voice Party (Halkın Sesi Partisi), headed by the former leader of SP, Numan Kurtulmuş.

To outside observers, including some in the United States, it often appears that AKP leaders, notably Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, champion "professional" Muslims above all other groups. For example, they strongly defended Hamas as the democratic winner of the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. They then used the election results to justify Hamas politburo chief Khalid Mish'al's visit to Ankara, although Mish'al himself is

not an elected official and resides in Damascus, not Palestine. Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu have further maintained that there can be no credible peace process without Hamas. If their assessment is correct, why have they not encouraged Hamas to follow Turkey's example and accept the existence of the State of Israel – if only as an entrée into negotiations to help revive that process? Meanwhile, these Turkish officials half-heartedly attend to relations with Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas as an afterthought. He recognizes Israel and is widely viewed as a *bona fide* partner for a peace process. That the PA government is mainly secular and Abbas and his ministers lack Hamas's roots in the Muslim Brotherhood and religious bravado arguably may be responsible for this neglect.

AKP officials also use extremely harsh rhetoric to castigate Israeli actions against the Palestinians and softer comments to criticize Hamas when it indiscriminately fires rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel. Prime Minister Erdoğan's repeated and unrelenting condemnation of Israel's conduct during its December 2008 - January 2009 military campaign against Hamas and for its subsequent ill treatment of the Palestinians in Gaza has not abated. This stance has won him a rock star's fan base among Arabs and Muslims and resonates with voters at home as

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Turks have great sympathy for the Palestinians. Yet, Erdoğan's inability to move on two years later has deprived his government of a pivotal role as a bridge between Israel and the Palestinians as well as between Israel and Syria. Turkey had previously been a friend to all parties, but Israel now views it with suspicion and is likely not to accept Turkish mediation in the future. In this instance, as in others, the party backed the Muslim side against the non-Muslim one and chose domestic popularity over constructive action in the foreign policy arena.

AKP's Muslim favoritism reverberates beyond the Israeli-Palestinian process and into Turkey's relations with the United States and the European Union as the party's view of Hamas differs sharply from Turkey's allies. Hamas is a U.S. State Department-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)<sup>1</sup> and is on the EU list of terrorist groups. As members of the international "Quartet" tasked with facilitating the peace process, U.S. and EU officials consider PA President Abbas to be

<sup>1</sup> U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Terrorism 2009, 5 August 2010, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2009>.

Israel's partner in the process, however stalemated. The difference in the U.S. and AKP approaches has created significant difficulties in Turkey's relations with Congress and with pro-Israel U.S. groups. AKP's stance also diverges from the EU's efforts to achieve a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP), although Turkey is a candidate for EU membership and therefore is supposed to align its policies with those of the EU. For the AKP, domestic considerations apparently take precedence over U.S. distress and over possible effects on relations with the EU.

The theme of AKP's Muslim solidarity with the Palestinians should not be exaggerated, as the AKP obviously has not been solely responsible for the deterioration in Israel-Turkish relations in recent years. However, the party is not noticeably

fretful over this development and its leaders have exploited the Israeli government's repeated missteps in the relationship to their benefit. Prime Minister Erdoğan's intemperate dressing down of President Shimon Peres at the January 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos over Israel's conduct during its conflict with Hamas bolstered his popularity in the Arab street and won him a hero's welcome at home. AKP added nationalist tropes to its defense of fellow Muslims, i.e., the Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip, with the

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Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010, when eight Turks and a Turkish-American were killed in the melee. Turkish leaders of the aid flotilla hailed Hamas and are said to have links to the Felicity Party (SP) and to AKP Members of Parliament. Again, the AKP did not want to be outflanked on its right. Israeli officials and media countered the Turkish focus on the victims with one on their violent actions and their links to Hamas. That view gained no traction in Turkey's public space that the ruling party dominates.

On Iran, AKP government officials quickly accepted the disputed results of the controversial 2009 presidential election as an "internal" affair. Once more, this contrasted with U.S. and EU criticism of the vote and of the regime's forceful suppression of the Green Movement opposition. In this case, the party favored Muslims, even if Shi'a, over non-Muslim critics. Prime Minister Erdoğan has described President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a "friend."<sup>2</sup> Since the election, Washington

<sup>2</sup> Robert Tait, "Iran is our Friend, Says PM Alongside Swipe at Disdainful EU," *The Guardian*, 26 October 2009.

and other Western capitals have used several opportunities to draw public international attention to Tehran's violations of human rights. AKP officials claim that they express concerns to Iranian counterparts more effectively in private even though public diplomacy may be needed in cases of egregious offenses and might serve to align Turkey with democracies against an autocracy.

AKP leaders also shield Iran against criticism of its nuclear program. Prime Minister Erdoğan has described reports that Iran intends to produce nuclear weapons as "speculation"<sup>3</sup> and has vigorously defended Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for civilian purposes. This is despite the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) published doubts about Iran's intentions. Perhaps the Prime Minister is taking the word of his Muslim "friend", Mahmoud. Erdoğan also has not expressed concern about the potential of an Iranian nuclear weapons' program to upset the bilateral balance of power as well as regional power dynamics. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu tried to prevent enhanced UN sanctions on Iran for failing to ensure that its nuclear program is used for peaceful purposes with the Tehran Declaration of May 2010 and Turkey then voted against them. The sanctions are intended to pressure Iran into an agreement to stop uranium enrichment and delays in imposing them may delay an accord. In this instance, Davutoğlu provided shelter for the Muslim side against the non-Muslim P5+1. He also ignored signals that the United States views Iran's nuclear program as a national security issue. His choice and the UN vote are having detrimental effects on the bilateral U.S.-Turkish relationship to this day.

Sudan provides perhaps the most egregious example of AKP's Muslim chauvinism. The Turkish government welcomed a visit by President Omar al Bashir in August 2008, after the International Criminal Court indicted him for genocide and only dissuaded Bashir from attending a meeting in Turkey in November 2009 after international pressure. Prime Minister Erdoğan has asserted that he does not believe that Sudanese forces committed acts of genocide in Darfur, arguing "It is not possible for those who belong to the Muslim faith to carry out genocide."<sup>4</sup> His comments were widely viewed as over the top and possibly counter-factual. Yet, they were in line with AKP officials' propensity to defend predominantly Muslim countries and groups –Syria, Iran, Sudan, and Hamas– and to refrain from reproaching them for abuses of human rights or democratic deficiencies.

Finally, while the AKP has served as a Muslim paladin, it has neglected the Cyprus issue since its proactive support for the Annan Plan in 2004 proved unsuccessful and allowed agreements to normalize relations with Armenia to languish. Is it coincidental that Cyprus and Armenia do not provide the AKP with Muslim "victims"?

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<sup>3</sup> "Erdoğan Deems Iran Sanctions Unfair," *Al-Manar TV Online*, 11 September 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, " 'Axis' Debate from Washington," *Milliyet*, 9 November 2009.

## ***Muscular Nationalism***

It is often remarked that Turks are a proud, strongly nationalist people. AKP officials play to this sense of pride with an attitude proclaiming that their government and country are superior to others. They claim to represent the truth or what is right and characterize their positions as “fair,” “principled,” or “humanitarian,” suggesting that others, including the United States, do not. The statements of some of these individuals have left U.S. audiences with an impression of unbounded arrogance.<sup>5</sup> This may simply be a way of communicating a very muscular nationalism and a means to challenge opposition parties to the right of AKP domestically. However, critics note that AKP’s policy of unconditional engagement with dictatorial, if not criminal, regimes and groups undermines its attempt to occupy the moral high ground and fails to portray Turkey as better than others countries.

As some have noted, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s efforts to achieve “zero problems” with neighboring countries have been selective. Since their laudatory and proactive support for the unsuccessful 2004 Annan Plan for a settlement on Cyprus, AKP officials have abandoned the issue – even though the EU considers the lack of a solution to the Cyprus issue to be a major obstacle to Turkey’s accession and the AKP claims not to have abandoned Turkey’s ambition to join the EU. The Foreign Minister and his ministerial cohort express pro forma support for a settlement, but appear unengaged in the ongoing UN negotiations. Cyprus has long been viewed as a Turkish national issue and the AKP refuses to compromise on opening Turkish ports and airports for Cypriot transport, on Turkey’s troop presence on the island, on the prerogatives accorded Turkey in the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee, or on support for the Turkish Cypriots that now equates to support for Turkish Cypriot President Derviş Eroğlu’s hardline positions. Given that the political right would exploit any AKP initiative that might facilitate a settlement in order to weaken AKP domestically, AKP has chosen to pursue its short term domestic interests rather than longer term EU ones.

Similarly, efforts to improve relations with Armenia have proven transitory. On the heels of the October 2009 signing of protocols that would have normalized bilateral Turkish-Armenian relations, Prime Minister Erdoğan reaffirmed Azerbaijan’s veto power over normalization and over the opening of Turkey’s border with Armenia until the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is solved. The dispute has been lingered since the early 1990s and no end is in sight. Therefore, it might readily be concluded that normalization is not in sight either. In this case, Erdoğan chose Turkey’s closest Turkic ethnic kin (and its energy resources) over a breakthrough in relations with a non-Turkic neighbor.

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<sup>5</sup> The Prime Minister’s advisor Ibrahim Kalin and AKP Deputy Party President Ömer Çelik made particularly off-putting statements during their spring 2010 visit to Washington.

Reaching accommodations with Armenia and Cyprus are goals with limited domestic appeal and might prove counterproductive to the AKP's power drive. Compromises would provide ammunition for the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) at a time when AKP is trying to deny it parliamentary representation in the next election. (Erdoğan has stated his preference for a two-party system and MHP is the third party in parliament.) Hence, these issues have not produced needed but unpopular government leadership and decision-making. In other words, identification with nationalist preferences better serves to keep the party in power and crowds out leadership and hard decisions. The hierarchy of the AKP government's foreign policy choices reflects the party's domestic priorities.

Muscular nationalism is especially evident in Prime Minister Erdoğan's tendency to identify himself with his country. When he feels personally insulted in an international setting, he then suggests that his country has been insulted and that it is his duty to defend it. For example, he described his overreaction to the 2009 Davos incident as required for the defense of Turkey. This played well politically at home.

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### **Mercantilism**

The economic motivation for the AKP's foreign policies is undeniable. Since the 1980's, exports have been the engine of Turkey's economic growth and, since the AKP came to power, Turkey has experienced remarkable economic growth.<sup>6</sup> From 2002 to 2008, economic growth averaged six percent. After a brief setback in 2009 due to the global economic downturn, it rebounded in 2010 with a rate of more than 7 percent. Exports rose more than four-fold from 32 billion dollars in 2002 to 132 billion dollars in 2009.

While half of Turkey's trade still is with Europe and Germany, Britain, and Italy are the top recipients of Turkey's exports, that share is diminishing as trade is growing with Arab countries and Iran. Turkish officials tend to announce ambitious trade targets with these neighboring countries. For example, bilateral trade with Iraq

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<sup>6</sup> Turkey's economic growth also may be attributed to the government's decision to keep in place the major economic reforms instituted by its predecessor after the 2000-2001 economic crisis, such as floating the lira strengthening the banking system, and ensuring the independence of the central bank. It also has carried out a program of gradually privatizing state economic enterprises. Critics have noted that the growth is not without increasing risks due to the expanding current account deficit.

reached seven billion dollars in 2009, and the two governments then said that they aimed to increase it to 20 billion dollars in 2014. Bilateral trade with Iran reached 10 billion dollars in 2008, but dropped to 5.5 billion dollars in 2009 with the global recession. The two governments still claimed a goal of 30 billion dollars in the next few years. Trade with Syria reached 1.8 billion dollars in 2009, and plans have been announced to establish a regional free trade zone among Turkey, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Turkey stands to benefit most from the arrangement because it is the largest economy and exporter among the four putative partners. Turkey also has increased its investments in neighboring countries.

Under the AKP, Turkey has established visa-free regimes with many of its neighbors in order to remove barriers to trade and tourism. Tourism has grown, and many new visitors are from Arab countries, Iran, and Russia. Moreover, the government is increasingly reaching out beyond Europe and the neighborhood to Latin America, Asia, and Africa for new markets.

The increase in trade has served the party well. It has particularly benefited the so-called “Anatolian tigers,” mid-sized and smaller cities, where AKP’s core constituents reside. As they prosper, they share their growing wealth with their favored party or groups that support it. Their generosity enabled AKP to withstand financial penalties imposed in 2007, when it was judged to be a “focal point of anti-secular activities.”

Turkey opposed UN sanctions on Iran because, Prime Minister Erdoğan insisted, they were unfair and based on speculations. Turkey is abiding by the UN sanctions, but not the more sweeping ones that the United States and EU imposed. Trade and energy ties with Iran are a major reason for this stance. (Another reason is the view that the international community, particularly the United States, inadequately compensated Turkey for enforcing sanctions on the regime of Saddam Hussein and it does not want to experience comparable losses now.)

Trade has become so important that the AKP overlooks otherwise sensitive issues with neighbors. It treats in a perfunctory fashion Syrian and Iraqi complaints about what they believe is Turkey’s failure as the upstream Euphrates riparian to maintain the flow of water that they believe has exacerbated a severe multi-year drought. Similarly, Turkey and Syria no longer discuss Hatay, a coastal province in south-east Turkey that the French mandate over Syria ceded to Turkey in 1939, but that still appears on Syrian maps. It is only of minor importance when compared to the opportunities offered by the Syrian market. Trade and energy ties to Iran trump concerns about its nuclear program. Energy and business ties with Azerbaijan are more important than denying it the ability to veto relations with Armenia and the benefits the latter might bring in Washington and in Europe.

### ***Coincidental Sincerity***

To point out that AKP uses foreign policy for domestic political gain is not to question the sincerity of the AKP's belief in Muslim solidarity, muscular nationalism, or mercantilism. Yet, it is important also to identify policy priorities that favor regional and Turkic partners over conformity to European values and policies, over stated U.S. policy goals, and, in some cases, over what some might consider the best interest of Turkey as opposed to the party. Recognizing this perspective may enable U.S. and European policymakers to deal with the increasing challenges of relations with Turkey under an AKP with a renewed electoral mandate. Its not so much that an AKP government will continue to be unpredictable, as some analysts have observed, but that it will predictably continue to implement policies that advance its domestic political goals.