

EROSION OF AN ALLIANCE

Since the ascension of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power, officials of the Turkish government are using Islam and “our Muslim brothers in the Middle East” as reference points for governing and for conducting foreign policy. With AKP’s continuous harsh criticism of the U.S. and the West in general, one finds a Turkish public opinion that is increasingly anti-American and increasingly identifies with Islamic causes. Washington is now concerned not only because of the ramifications of a new AKP government for American interests in the Middle East, but also because of its devastating impact of such a development on the traditionally secular, democratic and western people of Turkey.

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A few months ago, at a meeting in Washington D.C., one of Turkish Prime Minister Recep T. Erdoğan's top advisors asserted that it was quite natural for Turks to respond emotionally to developments in the Middle East because their "Muslim brethren" were in "agony" in places like Iraq and the Palestinian territories.

Since the ascension of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002, officials of the Turkish government are using Islam and "our Muslim brothers in the Middle East" as reference points for governing and for conducting foreign policy.

Add to this AKP's continuous and harsh criticism of the U.S. and the West in general, and one finds a Turkish public opinion that is increasingly anti-American and increasingly identifies with Islamic causes.

The realignment of Turkey's traditionally secular and pro-Western foreign policy towards closer relations with anti-Western actors in the Middle East foreshadows serious problems for the future. Under AKP's leadership, the U.S. and Turkey will find themselves on the opposite ends of the political divide on issues relating to the Middle East, whether on the Israeli-Arab conflict, or Iran's nuclearization.

New Tendencies in Foreign Policy

For decades Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East was characterized as one of non-alignment. Particularly in later years, as various Turkish governments sought the role of mediator between the West and the Muslim world, Turks remained equidistant from all parties, while looking at the issues at hand through a pro-Western prism.

Today the reference point for foreign policy has changed to that of Islam. AKP has forged closer relations not only with Muslim countries –it is perhaps in its interest to have good neighborly relations– but specifically with those Muslim countries that are vehemently anti-U.S. and anti-Western. Syria and Iran lead the pack of anti-Americanism in the Middle East and now Turkey is identified as part of that pack.

Following Rafiq Hariri's assassination, the West stood together to demand the end of Syrian occupation of Lebanon. Turkey, on the other hand, expressed solidarity with Syria. To that end, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül snubbed the Western world when he said that Syrian leader Bashar Assad is "loved by his people."¹ The previously planned visit of President Necdet Sezer to Syria was seen as a means to stick a finger in America's eye and was encouraged by many Turkish intellectuals.²

¹ "Turkish Expressions of Solidarity with Syria," *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series*, No.883. 23 March 2005.

² "Turkish Media on the Anniversary of the March 1, 2003 Parliamentary Resolution Not Allowing U.S. Troops to Open a Northern Front against Iraq from Turkish Soil," *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series*, No. 874, 8 March 2005.

Then-U.S. Ambassador Eric Edelman's comments about the planned visit were misquoted in the Turkish press and created hostility towards America.³ Alleged American military plans against the Syrian regime began to surface. Ambassador Edelman's Jewish heritage was "exposed" and led to conjecture about Israeli involvement in Hariri's assassination.

In a similar way, the AKP government chose to remain outside and indeed against the Western world in its relations with Hamas. When the international community almost unanimously called on Hamas to renounce violence and recognize Israel's right to exist, AKP officials (despite reported Turkish Foreign Ministry's protests) hosted Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal - the chief of Hamas's terrorist wing who at the time was in exile in Syria.

To assume that Meshaal can operate independent of Syrian intelligence or its Iranian masters is to fail to understand the links between Iran, Syria, and their support of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. Prime Minister Erdoğan fully supported Meshaal's visit to Turkey and by doing so once again chose to align Turkey with Iran and Syria. What Mr. Erdoğan et al. chose to ignore is that Hamas is not "Islam." Hamas is an internationally recognized terrorist organization. No democratic country should tarnish itself by association with a group whose charter includes plans for the destruction of another country.

Unfortunately, AKP officials have fallen into the trap that has plagued Europe for decades. Certain European countries have declined to identify the PKK as a terrorist organization; AKP officials practice the same folly in regard to Hamas. In the same meeting in Washington noted above, AKP officials declined to label Hamas as such and were later quoted in the Turkish press claiming, "The PKK is a terrorist organization...the kind of comparison to Hamas is completely ugly."⁴

This demonstrates the weakening of the ethical basis of Turkish politics, as well as the lack of moral clarity of the AKP government. Since 2002, AKP had sought to become the "honest broker" between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel rightfully regards Hamas as an illegitimate partner for peace - after all, this terrorist group rejects Israel's right to exist. By meeting with Meshaal, Turkey lost the privilege of acting as an honest broker. The only entity that gained from this visit was Hamas itself as it used the visit to attempt to upgrade its worldwide image. Worse for AKP, as soon as Meshaal left Ankara for Iran,

³ U.S. Ambassador Eric Edelman's comments about President Sezer's planned visit to Syria were interpreted as criticism of the visit. Among other things, Ambassador Edelman stated, "...We hope Turkey will join this international coalition. Of course, evaluating this position of the international community is Turkey's decision." The Turkish press asserted that the Ambassador gave "ultimatum-like message about Syria" and called for the Edelman's removal from Turkey.

⁴ "Turkish Media: Washington No Longer Trusts AKP Government," *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series*, No.1145, 24 April 2006.

he claimed that he would never accept Israel's right to exist and never had such an intention when he visited Turkey.⁵

AKP's reactions to the recent war in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah were quite revealing. Mr. Erdoğan went on a rampant attack against Israel, while continuously and insistently omitting the responsibilities of Hezbollah. Casting the war as if it were a one-sided atrocity, he rhetorically asked, "What is Israel's problem? Is it trying to destroy the Palestinians completely? We would like to know that. If that's the case, then the whole world should and will respond to Israel."⁶

Mehmet Elkatmış, AKP Deputy and Chairman of the Human Rights Commission in Parliament said "Israel is taking revenge of the Holocaust by Hitler from the innocent people in the region."⁷ Another parliamentarian claimed, "The cruelty and inhuman acts of Israel in the Middle East has outdone the cruelty of Hitler."⁸

Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül in a Washington Post editorial blamed Israel for the war and criticized the U.S. for a lack of leadership. In the 437-word editorial there was not a single mention of Hezbollah.⁹ While Gül and other AKP officials blamed the U.S., the UN and other organizations for failing to stop this "tragedy", Mr. Erdoğan criticized Arab countries for not stopping Israel against Lebanon.

Throughout the war, Mr. Erdoğan continued to misrepresent facts and mislead the Turkish public. In an interview with NTV channel on July 11 2006, he asserted that in response to the release of kidnapped Israeli soldiers, all Hamas is asking for is the release of children, women, elderly and handicapped people in Israeli prisons.¹⁰ This is an insidious misrepresentation of facts.

In another speech, Mr. Erdoğan pointed to the "Gaza beach killings" as the cause for the escalation that led to the war.¹¹ Even though many international organizations, including the UN, were fast to blame Israel for the killings of a Palestinian family on the Gaza beach, further investigations by a UN commission exonerated Israel.¹² This was publicized worldwide. No prime minister has the privilege of ignoring the facts, especially when he blames another country for the killing of innocent people.

⁵ Soner Çağaptay, " Hamas Visits Ankara: The AKP Shifts Turkey's Role in the Middle East," *Washington Institute Policy Watch* No: 1081, 16 February 2006.

⁶ CNN-Turk, 15 July 2006.

⁷ "Turkish PM Erdoğan Says 'Nobody Should Expect Us to Remain Neutral': Reactions from the Turkish Media to the Middle East Crisis," *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series*, No. 1251. August 16, 2006.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Abdullah Gül, "An Appeal for Leadership: Why Hasn't the World's Lone Superpower Stopped This Tragedy?," *The Washington Post*, 3 August 2006. A27.

¹⁰ Quoted in Haksöz Haber, 11 July 2006.

¹¹ "İsrail, Çocukları Acımasızca Öldürdü. ABD, daha duyarlı Olmalı [Israel Ruthlessly Murders Kids . The United States Should be More Aware]," *Radikal Daily*, 15 July 2006.

¹² For more information, see "Gaza Beach Libel," www.honestreporting.com, 13 June 2006.

But for those who follow Turkey closely, such statements come as no surprise as various AKP officials and their media collaborators have made similar assertions since their ascension to power. Consider these:

- Mr. Erdoğan called Israel “a terrorist state” upon the assassination of Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin.¹³
- AKP Parliamentarians claimed that the U.S. was carrying out genocide in Fallujah. They also claimed that U.S. soldiers are using chemical weapons in Fallujah and raping Iraqi women and children.¹⁴
- Mrs. Erdoğan praised the movie *Valley of the Wolves* (in which, among other things, American soldiers are shown massacring innocent guests at a wedding and a Joseph Mengele-styled Jewish surgeon removes organs from Iraqi prisoners). Speaker of the Parliament Bülent Arınç called it “very realistic.”¹⁵
- Since Mr. Erdoğan came to power not once has he condemned Al-Qaeda – not even after the group claimed responsibility for the deadly attacks in Turkey in 2003.¹⁶

Public Opinion Matters!

The result of all this is a manipulation of public opinion that in a short period of time, has become vehemently anti-Western, anti-American, and one that supports any entity or country that is anti-Western in nature. Turkish foreign policy as enunciated by the AKP became a zero-sum game and endorsed by the public as such: If the U.S. is the enemy today then any country that stands against the U.S. is our friend.

The various public opinion polls reflect exactly that. And the results are worrisome. According to the latest Pew Global Attitudes Poll, only 12 percent of Turks have a positive view of the U.S. (the lowest among the 14 countries surveyed).¹⁷ A “Nationalism Poll” conducted by Tempo Magazine in Turkey found that 35.6 percent of Turks believe that the U.S. poses the gravest threat to Turkish national security.¹⁸ Of those surveyed 25.8 percent believe that a possible establishment of a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq poses the gravest threat. This, of course, is directly linked to U.S. presence in Iraq.

In the same survey, 52.2 percent of those responded indicated “the sale of Turkish land to foreigners” is the development in recent history has made them most uncomfortable. This should be analyzed in the context of various press reports both in the Islamic and mainstream Turkish media that Israelis were buying land in southeastern Turkey to realize their “Greater Israel project.” The reports in even well respected newspapers

¹³ Chris McGreal, “Turkish PM Accuses Israel of Practicing State Terrorism” *The Guardian*, 4 June 2004

¹⁴ “Turkish demonstrators protest US-led offensive in Iraq,” *India Daily*, 27 November 2004.

¹⁵ Nicholas Birch, “Audiences cheer film's anti-U.S. message,” *The Washington Times*, 15 February 2006; Richard Morgan, “What Turks Are Watching A new wave of anti-American pop culture,” *Slate Magazine*, 13 June 2006.

¹⁶ Ayhan Şimşek, “Ideology matters: Sending troops to Lebanon can't end divide between AKP, Washington,” *The New Anatolian*, 31 August 2006

¹⁷ “America’s Image Slips, But Allies Share US Concerns over Iran, Hamas,” *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, 13 June 2006.

¹⁸ “*Türkiye’de Milliyetçilik Araştırması [Research on Nationalism in Turkey]*,” <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/368186.asp>, 7 April 2006

became so prevalent that members of the Turkish-Jewish community went to the Office of Land Registry and proved otherwise.¹⁹

The Transatlantic Trends Survey of 2006 conducted by the German Marshall Fund found that Turks feel twice as warmly toward Iran than they do toward the U.S. “On a 100-point ‘thermometer’ scale, Turkish ‘warmth’ toward the U.S. declined from 28 degrees in 2004 to 20 in 2006, and toward the E.U. from 52 degrees in 2004 to 45. Over the same period, Turkish warmth toward Iran rose from 34 degrees to 43.”²⁰ This is shocking since for a long time, Turks have considered Islamist Iran an enemy because of its support for the PKK and Kurdish Hezbollah in Turkey, as well as for spearheading the assassination of secular Turkish intellectuals.

Another interesting poll, conducted by Taylor Nelson Sofres during the war, found that 72 percent of Turks blame the war in Lebanon on Israel (compare with 59 percent even in Lebanon); and that 44 percent of Turks sympathize with Hezbollah in the war, while only 10 percent sympathize with Israel.²¹ For a country that has lost 30,000 of its citizens to terrorism, the results of these polls are startling. It demonstrates that anti-Americanism is spreading beyond the extremist fringe. It also shows that the Turkish government is not providing its people with accurate, fact-based information. Instead, it is spinning anti-Americanism to boost its domestic standing.

While Turkey has a free and independent press, Mr. Erdoğan should use the moral authority of the Prime Minister’s office to denounce anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism and anti-Westernism. Failing to do so will result in a long-lasting effect on Turkish attitudes vis-à-vis the West. The next time the AKP government chooses to cooperate with the U.S. it may not find the public supporting its policies. This can prove detrimental both for Turkey and the U.S.

Domestic Developments: A Key Indicator?

Notwithstanding the clear foreign policy of AKP, its lasting effect on the Turkish state will find life in the roots of domestic policies. As Dr. Soner Çağaptay asserted, “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.”²²

Recently, the Chief of the Turkish General Staff, General Yaşar Büyükanıt and Turkish President Necdet Sezer – currently (perceived as) the foremost protectors of Turkish secular and democratic identity – have accused Mr. Erdoğan’s government of promoting Islam within the Turkish state and avowed to take every measure against Islamic

¹⁹ Author’s interview with members of the Turkish-Jewish Community.

²⁰ “Transatlantic Trends: Key Finding 2006,” *The German Marshall Fund* et al. 2006. Pg. 4

²¹ Quoted in Burak Bekdil, “Directionless Turkey,” *Turkish Daily News*, 13 September 2006.

²² Dr. Soner Çağaptay, “Islamists in Charge,” *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, 18 August 2006.

fundamentalism.²³ Although the analysis of domestic developments is beyond the scope of this article, a few examples should briefly be examined.

Perhaps the most menacing proposal by the AKP government was to re-engineer the system by which judges and prosecutors are appointed in Turkey's secular judiciary. According to this new law, a committee consisting of five jurists and two officials from the Ministry of Justice will be stripped of their authority to appoint and assign judges. Instead, the Minister of Justice will have the unchecked power to do so. Although President Sezer vetoed this bill once, according to Turkish Constitution he does not have the right to veto it again once AKP re-introduces the bill in Parliament. Add to this, the Parliament's recent passage of a law that reduced mandatory retirement age of public servants and the consequent vacancy for 4,000 (out of a total of 9,000) judges and prosecutors. As one prominent American lawyer asserts, "these developments...will result in a single political party with strong Islamic orientation...enacting social and political agenda that will distance Turkey from its parity with Europe as well as Turkey's democratic and secular constitutional traditions."²⁴

Similarly, Mr. Erdoğan challenged a decision by the European Court of Human Rights against women wearing headscarves in public domains by asserting "the court has no right to speak on this issue. The right belongs to the *ulema* (clerics)."²⁵ He also lit the torch against secular university rectors as in the case of much publicized Van Yüzüncü Yıl University. Mr. Erdoğan called Islam Turkey's supra-identity.²⁶ His government tried to ban alcohol in municipal buildings, impose *halal* food, and establish the country's first Islamic exchange-traded fund.²⁷

There are also credible reports about an influx of "green money" from wealthy Middle Eastern countries. Although this author does not have first-hand sources to prove this and relies on the work of other analysts²⁸, the latest IMF report itself is revealing. The report affirms that "a substantial part of the [capital] flows remains short-term and debt-creating, *with a large component of external financing remaining unidentified* (emphasis

²³ "Sezer'den İrtica Uyarısı [Sezer Warns Against Islamic Fundamentalism]," *Sabah Daily*, 1 October 2006; "Büyükant: İrtica Tehditi Vardır [Büyükant: We are facing the threat of Islamic Fundamentalism]," *NTV-MSNBC*, 5 October 2006.

²⁴ Author's interview with leading American lawyer.

²⁵ "The AKP Government's Attempts to Move Turkey from Secularism to Islamism (Part II)," *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series*, No. 1048, 13 December 2005.

²⁶ "The AKP Government's Attempts to move Turkey from Secularism to Islamism (Part III)," *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series*, No.1086. 7 February 2006.

²⁷ "Müslüman Türkiye'de Alkol Yasağı Yayılıyor [In Muslim Turkey the Ban on Alcohol is Spreading]," *Agence France-Presse*, 23 November 2005; Ian Traynor, "Alcohol the Battleground in East-West Conflict," *The Guardian*, 23 December 2005; Dr. Soner Çağaptay, "Halal Turkey," www.bitterlemons-international.org, 9 March 2006; "Ülker Unit to Launch Islamic Exchange-Traded Fund," *Turkish Daily News*, 27 December 2005.

²⁸ See Michael Rubin, "Green Money, Islamist Politics in Turkey," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2005. Frank J. Gaffney, Jr., "Islamofascist Coup?," *The Washington Times*. 14 March 2006.

added).²⁹ According to Michael Rubin, 5 billion dollars has entered the system since AKP took power.³⁰

In the domestic front, there also exists a visible rise in anti-Semitism. In a country that has taken justifiable pride in its tolerance and the security in which its 500 year-old Jewish community has lived, these are troubling developments. The mainstream media is following the Islamic press in this regard. During the land registry uproar mentioned above, one mainstream newspaper printed the headline “Israelis Buying Land in Turkey” while the data provided in the remainder of the article showed the opposite. But the effect was formidable – Israelis and Jews were regarded with suspicion.

Anti-Semitic incidents are reported by the Turkish-Jewish community. They receive threats and Israeli tourists report harassment, particularly in the Mediterranean resorts (one clothing store in Alanya posted a sign on its door that read “For Children Killers Israelis No Sale No Entry”).³¹ Most recently, the media accused Israeli tourists of spreading a tick-like, blood-sucking insect to plague the Turkish people. Most worrisome perhaps is the increasing tendency to blame Turkish Jews for Israel’s policies. In a recent poll, only 15 percent of Turks had a favorable view of Jews.³²

After four years of governance, AKP’s misguided policies and disingenuous public discourse have left the Turkish public suspicious of everything “foreign” - the U.S., the E.U. and its non-Muslim citizens. One is immediately reminded of Mr. Erdoğan’s 1994 speech at the opening of the AKP’s Ümraniye Borough Organization building in Istanbul, in which he asserted:

They say secularism is fading away. If the Turkish people so desire, of course it will perish...You cannot be both Muslim and secular...The Turkish nation cannot be united under “Turkishness.” The Ottomans kept thirty different nations under the policy of *ummet* (religious community). We will do it through faith... They ask if Turkey will become Algeria? We are coming gradually and under the surface such that people will not object to our ways...We cannot be the protectors of the current system. Those who prepared this Constitution will soon be used as a cat’s paw to change it.³³

²⁹ IMF Country Report for Turkey, No. 06/268, July 2006, pg. 7

³⁰ Michael Rubin, “Green Money, Islamist Politics in Turkey,” *Middle East Quarterly*. Winter 2005. Pg.4

³¹ Yediot Ahronot, “Turkey: Sign reads ‘Israeli Murderers Keep Out,’”

<http://www.yonitheblogger.com/2006/08/>

³² “Kene Zanlısı’ İsraililer Kraliçelik Yarışında [Israelis Accused of Spreading the ‘Tick’ are Competing at a Beauty Contest,]” *Radikal Daily*, 27 July 2006; “İsraili Turistler Taciz Ediliyor [Israeli Tourists are Threatened,]” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 14 August 2006.

³³ “Erdoğan, RP İstanbul İl Başkanı’yken tekbir sesleriyle kesilen konuşmasında ‘Avrupa Birliği’ne girmeyeceğiz’, ‘layıklık tabii elden gidecek’ diyor, [Then-Refah Party Provincial Chairman Erdoğan’s speech was interrupted by calls of *Allahuekber* as he asserted ‘We Will Not Enter the E.U.’, ‘Of Course Secularism will be Perished,]” *Milliyet Daily*, 21 August 2001.

What is more, AKP's efforts to weaken Turkey's traditionally secular entities – for example, the judicial and education systems – will ensure that even if most Turks will want their state to remain secular, in the absence of checks and balances, they will be bereft of tools to fight Islamic fundamentalism.

The Future

Due to its composition and pedigree, AKP has been encouraging empathy with fellow Muslims. Supported by AKP, Islam is en route to becoming Turkey's new identity. What has distinguished Turkey for decades, that is, its secular, democratic, pro-Western identity, is now being seriously challenged. AKP successfully shifted Turkey's traditionally pro-Western foreign policy orientation to that identified with Muslim causes. The changes the government seeks to undertake in the domestic front demonstrate AKP's aversion to secularism. And if one considers Mr. Erdoğan's past statements on democracy, the picture becomes quite alarming. In a 1996 interview he said, "We say that democracy is a means, not an end. [We] take Islam as a frame of reference. We do not want to do or experience anything that goes against our frame of reference."³⁴

Given these changes and under future AKP governance, U.S. and Turkish policy interests in the Middle East will continue to diverge. Turks –perhaps rightfully– blame the U.S. for its inaction against PKK camps in Northern Iraq, but AKP's misguided zero-sum foreign policy pushes Turkey to forge closer relations with Iran and Syria. By making excuses and overtures to Hamas and Hezbollah, the Turkish government has become soft on terrorism and lost its clarity on the war against terrorists and the countries that support or harbor them.

Under AKP, Turkey is unlikely to join a western front against the Syrian dictatorial regime of Bashar Assad. When confronted about Iran's nuclear weapons program, AKP officials are quick to plead for a "nuclear-free Middle East," alluding to Israel's alleged nuclear program, while failing to acknowledge the dangers of a nuclear Iran. Turkey's increasing energy dependency on Iran will also determine its options. Even though Turkey has always abided by UN resolutions, should a strongly-worded UN resolution against Iran pass the Security Council, Turkey's position at this point remains at best ambivalent.

During the parliamentary debates that led to the passage of a resolution to send troops to Lebanon, Mr. Erdoğan stated that "Turkey would neither disarm nor harm Hezbollah"³⁵ But the mission set forth for UNIFIL must be clearly understood as helping the Government of Lebanon fulfill the terms of U.N. Resolution 1701, which seeks to prevent the rearming of Hezbollah in the south. AKP's worldview dictates friendly

³⁴ Quoted in Tulin Daloğlu, "Misreading the Prime Minister," *The Washington Times*. 21 March, 2006.

³⁵ Quoted in Dr. Soner Çağaptay, "Is There a Clash of Civilization? Islam, Democracy and U.S. Middle East Policy," September 14, 2006.

relations with apparently any Muslim entities (e.g., Hezbollah and Hamas). This perspective clashes with internationally held views. Such opposing beliefs - notwithstanding the fiercely secular identity of the Turkish Armed Forces- are likely to be a cause of great problems between the Turkish government and the West in actions in Lebanon.

AKP's defense of Islam goes further than anything found in most of the Arab world's state controlled media. During the war in Lebanon, the Turkish government was more "Arabist" than the Arabs and demonstrated stronger anti-American and anti-Israel sentiments than the Lebanese or most other Arabs. Similarly, the AKP government was the first to react to Pope Benedict XVI's remarks in the prime ministerial level. What this suggests for the future is Turkey taking the sides of anti-western forces in the Middle East and opposing, or at least undermining, U.S. policies in the region.

It is likely that AKP will emerge as the first party after Turkey goes to the polls next November (even if it may not hold the government because of the rise of other parties). Although nobody in Washington wants to "lose Turkey", most are now afraid of what it means for Turkey to remain under this government. They are concerned not only because of the ramifications of a new AKP government for American interests in the Middle East, but also because of its devastating impact of such a development on the traditionally secular, democratic and western people of Turkey.