AKP AND THE PARADOX OF ISLAMIC EUROPHILIA

While Turkish political Islam has historically expressed its opposition to the prospect of Turkey’s full participation in a “Christian Club,” the recent EU policy of AKP has constituted a radical breach with that past: AKP is now among the staunchest supporters of Turkey’s EU integration. The AKP case is only seemingly a paradox. In fact, it is highly indicative of how ruling party agendas are modified on account of realism, expediency and external pressure. The success of the AKP’s EU policy would refute the incompatibility of Islamic politics with Western political values, while its viability will be affected by the EU’s stance on Turkey’s membership bid.

Ioannis N. Grigoriadis

* Ioannis N. Grigoriadis holds an MIA degree from the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University. He is currently an MPhil/PhD student in Turkish Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. An earlier, extended version of this paper was presented under the title “Islamic Europhilia and the AKP” at the 2nd METU Conference of International Relations in June 2003. Email: ing7@columbia.edu
Until very recently the term “Islamic Europhilia” would merely be an oxymoron. Europe and Islam have been considered to be two terms with contrasting historical connotation and any attempt to reconcile or synthesize elements of both seemed to be doomed to fail. European and Islamic cultures were juxtaposed, with the borders of Europe contiguous with those of Christianity. In that view, claiming that an Islamic political party might in effect become the strongest advocate of Europeanization would sound absurd. Yet recent political developments in Turkey have challenged that viewpoint. The policy of Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP), with regards to Turkey’s EU vocation, constitute a unique attempt to synthesize political Islam and European political culture.

Turkey’s Islamic heritage has been cited as one of the main obstacles for its full integration into the European Union, while Turkish political Islam has historically expressed its suspicion –if not direct opposition– to the prospect of Turkey’s full participation in a “Christian Club”. The recent EU policy of AKP has, however, comprised a radical breach with that past: AKP is now among the staunchest supporters of Turkey’s EU integration. In this paper it will be argued that AKP policy regarding Turkey-EU relations signals the final stage in the rationalization process of Turkish political Islam. The AKP case is only seemingly a paradox; in fact, it is highly indicative of how party agendas are modified on account of realism, expedience and external pressure. It will also be argued that the success of the AKP experiment would signal Turkey’s definitive orientation toward Europe and refute the incompatibility of Islamic politics with Western political values, while their viability will be affected by the stance of the European Union as regards Turkey’s membership bid.

The Rationale Behind AKP’s Europhilia

The AKP decision to abandon traditional Islamic Euroskepticism and join the forces that actively supported Turkey’s membership of the European Union could be attributed to political realism, expedience and external pressure. Political realism is probably the main reason for the modification of AKP policy. The experience of all parties based on the Milli Görüş principles¹ could not be characterized as positive. Turkish political Islam managed to attract considerable popular support but never appealed to the greater Turkish public because of its purely and narrowly Islamic orientation. If a party with Islamic political character would ever manage to claim a protagonist role in Turkish politics, this would only happen through its transformation to a conservative center-right party with Islamic leanings. Active support for Turkey’s EU membership campaign became a symbol of that transformation, as opposition against any improvement of Turkey-EU relations lay in the heart of the Milli Görüş principles. A novel conceptualization of AKP

¹ “Milli Görüş” is the collective name for the original programme ideas of the first Turkish Islamist party National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi-MNP), which later served as source of inspiration for all later Islamist parties.
as “Islamic Democratic” party, the equivalent of Christian Democratic parties in the Islamic world, soon followed. Political realism is a common feature among popular-based non-conformist parties, which moderate their original political positions shortly before or after their electoral victory. Although AKP constituency might not have been as favorable to Turkey’s EU integration, the party leadership took a position that might alienate some of the party voters, but would—in the long run—serve AKP interests by rehabilitating it in the Turkish political scene.

Expedience was a second important element in AKP’s decision to pursue Turkey’s EU membership. While it was Western influence that paved the way to the introduction of a multi-party political system in Turkey and—in effect—greatly availed Turkish political Islam, all Milli Görüş-inspired parties viewed the European Economic Community/European Union as enemy and threat for Turkish sovereignty, culture and Islamic values. Contrary to all that, the AKP leadership realized that the European Union could be of critical help in the enforcement of some aspects of its political agenda. The key words in that process would be “human rights” and “democracy.” Raising the level of human rights protection in Turkey to the European standards fell within the scope of fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria for admission to the European Union. The reform in Turkey’s human rights legislation would necessarily mean a redefinition of public and private realm in Turkish society. Many activities that would—until the reform—fall within the scope of the public realm would now be transferred to the private realm and thus enjoy full protection under the new human rights legislation. With regard to democracy, the exercise of political power by organs with no or thin democratic legitimation like the National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu-MGK) would be impossible if Turkey’s legislation were to comply with the Copenhagen criteria. Concentration of all powers to democratically elected organs would greatly benefit AKP policies, as politically powerful but not democratically legitimized organs of the Turkish state have been the most vehement opponents of AKP and its policies, considering themselves to be the guardians of the secular Kemalist state. Improving relations between Turkey and the European Union would only benefit the position of popular, moderate, non-establishment parties like AKP.

External pressure was also a significant factor in facilitating the switch of AKP policy regarding the European Union. The Turkish state was the first to indirectly press toward AKP transformation. Turkey’s political circumstances did not allow for the existence of parties with heavy Islamic character. The fate of all Milli Görüş-inspired parties taught the future leaders of AKP that the secular imprint on Turkish politics had to be respected and any verbal or written acts that might be viewed as disrespectful of the Turkish constitution should be avoided. The position of European political institutions in this case rather added up to the existing pressure for reform. In July 2001, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) upheld the decision of the Turkish Constitutional Court in 1998 to close the Welfare Party. (“Refah Partisi [Welfare Party] and Others Vs. Turkey,” 2001) The court ruled that the closure “could reasonably be considered to meet a pressing social

---

2 The case of the Greek socialist party PASOK, a vehement opponent of Greece’s accession to the EU and close Greek-American relations in the 1970s, which radically altered its stance when it took over power in 1981, is highly indicative.
need for the protection of a democratic society”, because according to the ECHR analysis, the Welfare Party had espoused the possibility of instituting Islamic law in Turkey. This decision showed that support of European political institutions toward Turkish political parties under state persecution was not unconditional, and that the latter had to subscribe to European political values to be then able to claim European support. Islamic fundamentalism or even traditional political Islam could therefore hardly hope for support from European courts. AKP had to abandon policies influenced by its traditional Islamic elements and irreversibly orientate its policy toward the European Union.

**The Importance of the AKP Experiment**

The Islamic Europhilia trend, represented by AKP and epitomized by its novel approach on Turkey-EU relations, is one of the most important and interesting developments in Turkish politics (Berkan, 2003b). AKP’s full and unconditional support to Turkey’s accession process to the European Union signaled a convergence in the views of the vast majority of the Turkish political spectrum. With the exception of parties like the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi-MHP) and the traditional Islamist Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi-SP), full support to Turkey’s EU accession is a commonplace among all Turkish political parties. This is a strategic decision of unique importance, which consolidates Turkey’s commitment to the European Union. In view of that, any reform necessary for Turkey to start accession negotiations with the European Union can be more easily introduced and implemented, while prospective opponents of reform would now have to count that their actions would come in conflict with the expressed will of the majority of Turkish public opinion.

AKP’s decision to advocate Turkey’s accession to the European Union is also unique in the Islamic world’s commitment to European political values. Political Islam has been associated with intolerance, fundamentalist leanings and outright suspicion of Western civilization. The experience of Islamic political parties in Algeria and Egypt, as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran, verified that political values espoused by the European Union and its member states were not compatible with an Islamic form of government. The policies of Millî Görüş-influenced Turkish political parties also strengthened the aforementioned observation. Nevertheless, AKP came to refute the incompatibility of Islamic politics with the European Union. Its commitment to democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms rendered it the main locomotive of political reform in Turkey and the Islamic world in general.

**The Viability of the AKP Experiment**

Whether AKP succeeds in combining Islamic cultural and European political values will depend on a series of factors. The viability of that policy will first depend on the extent to which the AKP electoral base adopts it. Although AKP leadership is among the most

---

3 68 percent of the Turkish public supports Turkey’s EU membership, while only 15 percent opposes it, according to a poll organised by the Social, Economic and Political Research Foundation of Turkey (Türkiye Sosyal Ekonomik Siyasal Araştırmalar Vakfı-TÜSES). See: ‘AKP Açık Ara Önde CHP’nin Hali Harap,’ Radikal, 02/03/2004
ardent supporters of Turkey’s EU membership, most AKP voters are not yet convinced supporters of Turkey’s EU membership. Increasing grassroots support for AKP policy on the European Union would stabilize AKP’s transformation to a conservative center-rightist party. The cooperation of secular pro-EU elements of the Turkish society will also be of crucial importance. Suspicion against the real motives of the AKP policy switch has been wide, and the word takiye has been often cited as description of AKP practices. According to that view, AKP only pretends to espouse EU norms on human rights, freedoms and democracy and aims its transformation into an Islamic Democratic party (Belge, 2002); in fact, its true intentions have remained within the scope of Milli Görüş-inspired parties, namely the eventual introduction of Islamic law (şeriat).

Nonetheless, lack of cooperation among all pro-EU elements of Turkish society would not only impede the reform of Turkish political Islam, but also Turkey’s EU accession process. The AKP leadership has confirmed its commitment to pursue Turkey’s accession to the European Union and should be assisted in its effort toward that objective. This assistance could reduce the leverage of those elements in the Turkish state and society, which might have a stake in obstructing Turkey’s accession to the European Union.

Last but not least, a factor impacting the viability of the AKP experiment is the stance of the European Union itself. EU reactions on political developments in Turkish political Islam are unavoidably affected by the internal EU debate on the future character and identity of the European Union. Pondering on questions like where the borders of Europe lie or what defines European identity necessarily involves judgments on whether Turkey and Islam have a position in the European Union. The role of religion and religion-related culture in the European Union also have important bearing on EU views of Turkey and Islam, because the recognition of Christianity and/or Christian culture as a defining factor of Europeanness would effectively exclude Turkey from full EU membership, regardless of reform efforts aiming to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria. Views like those expressed by the President of the EU Constitutional Convention Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (d’Estaing, 2002) and recurring arguments on the Christian roots of the European Union and the impossibility of Turkey’s full EU membership showed that the question whether Turkey is eligible for EU membership is still hotly debated despite the EU Helsinki Summit decision to name Turkey a EU candidate state. AKP reform policies could greatly facilitate Turkey’s accession to a tolerant and inclusive European Union but would be of little avail if the European Union used elements common in most European countries but Turkey as the base of its collective identity. The European Union response to AKP-led Turkish efforts for EU membership should consolidate its inclusive character. The EU officials should demand from Turkey the fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria; on the other hand, Turkey should be expected to conduct negotiations in good faith. Turkey should be treated as any other European state with

4 The word “takiye” has the meaning of “pretension” in the vocabulary of Islam and refers to cases where Muslims are forced to hide their true belief out of external reasons.

5 Giscard D’Estaing stressed his strong disagreement to the prospect of Turkey’s EU membership: “Turkey is a country close to Europe, an important country, which has a respectable elite, but is not a European country. Its capital is not in Europe, 95 % of its population lives outside Europe, it is not a European country…. Since one leaves the continent, why leave the continent to the East and not leave to the West?…. I give my opinion: this is the end of the European Union.”
respect to its prospective EU membership. No hidden cultural or religious arguments should be employed in Turkey-EU negotiations that would render it futile. The conviction of the Turkish public opinion on the fair character of the negotiations would greatly help the implementation of the AKP political agenda on the European Union. Undoubtedly there are many obstacles to be overcome both on the Turkish and the European side and there is no guarantee that AKP campaign in favor of Turkey’s accession to the European Union will finally come to fruition. Yet the success of the Islamic Europhilia experiment would signal Turkey’s definitive integration in Europe (Berkan, 2003a) and mark the end of a perennial political debate that has occupied Ottoman and Turkish politics for almost two centuries.

References
‘AKP Açık Ara Önde CHP’nin Hali Harap’, Radikal, 2 March 2004
Belge, Murat, ‘Takiye Tartışması’, Radikal, 8 November 2002
Berkan, İsmet, ‘Türkiye ve AKP’nin Kaderi’, Radikal, 11 June 2003
———, ‘Türkiye’de Siyasal İslam’, Radikal, 19 May 2003
Giscard d’Estaing, Valéry, ‘Pour Ou Contre L’adhésion De La Turquie À L’union Européenne’, Le Monde, 8 November 2002
‘Refah Partisi [Welfare Party] and Others vs. Turkey’: European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), 2001