

## Islamist Political Power in Turkey: Challenges for Brussels and Washington

Steven A. Cook

Turkey is undergoing profound change. In the last two decades, Turkish society has become more complex and differentiated as a new class of politicians, entrepreneurs, and activists has emerged and accumulated political power. The *Adalet ve Kalkınma Parti* (Justice and Development Party, AKP), which was founded after an historic split within Turkey's Islamist movement in 2000, represents this new elite. Since 2002 the party has held an overwhelming majority in Turkey's legislature, the Grand National Assembly. With the end of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's term in office in the spring of 2007, the AKP succeeded in electing one of its own, Abdullah Gül, president. For a party that did not even exist in 2000, it was impressive that by the end of 2007, AKP was firmly in control of the executive and legislative branches of government. There are elements of the Turkish government, notably the Turkish General Staff and the judiciary, that are deeply suspicious of the party and its intentions. The expression and success of Islamist power that AKP represents is nothing less than extraordinary in Turkey's officially secular political order.

The emergence of AKP as the most important non-military actor in the Turkish political arena has generated an often heated national debate over, among other issues, the relationship between religion and state, the continued relevance of Kemalism, and the direction of Turkish foreign policy. The acceleration of Turkey's transition to democracy has been the most surprising development since AKP came to power in 2002. This is not to suggest that the party harbors an anti-democratic agenda. Hardly the Islamists of Hamas, Hezbollah, or even the Muslim Brotherhood, AKP's platform reveals that one of its primary goals is to forge a more democratic, modern, and pluralist Turkey. Indeed, at the time the party gained control of the parliament, the Turkish political system featured a range of authoritarian institutions and an influential military establishment intent on protecting the political order that Mustafa Kemal founded in 1924. In the 47 years since it first seized control of the country from a democratically elected government, the military undertook three additional *coups d'état*. Indeed, the combination of the structure of Turkish politics and the historical record indicated that AKP should have had difficulty pursuing its professed goals of political and economic reform.

Yet there was a new factor in Turkish politics that provided both an impetus for change and a favorable environment for AKP to embark on a wide-ranging project of reform in relative safety from the predatory politics of the General Staff: the European Union (EU). To be sure, Turkey has been an associate member of what was the European Economic Community since signing the Ankara agreement in 1963. Yet when combined

with the AKP's objectives, the EU's 1999 invitation to Turkey to become a candidate for full membership had a dynamic effect on Turkish politics. The incentive of EU membership altered the interests of Turkey's Islamists – who had traditionally been wary of and at times hostile to Turkey's Western vocation – and constrained the ability of the military to act. As a result, AKP was able to lead a coalition of conservative Muslims, big business, urban elites, and average Turks who, for a variety of interests, all supported the EU membership process. Between early 2003 and late 2004, the AKP-controlled parliament undertook seven reform packages – including measures that make it more difficult to close down political parties, enhance personal and political freedoms, and rein in (albeit incompletely) the General Staff – intended to bring Turkey's political system in line with European norms and standards.

Obstacles and problems remain before Turkey's democratic transition is complete. Still, there is no denying that Turkey is a different country from what it was five, ten, and fifteen years ago. To be sure, not all of the achievements are linked to the Justice and Development Party. For example, Turkey's impressive economic growth since 2002 has everything to do with the economic reform project that Kemal Derviş, Minister of Economic Affairs in the Ecevit government, guided before AKP came to power. It is important to note, however, that the impressive array of political changes since 2003 have been the work of the AKP. The party is responsible for forging a more democratic, more modern, more pluralist Turkey, thereby moving the country closer to the European Union and within reach of Atatürk's dream of "raising Turkey to the level of civilization." As positive as these changes are, they nevertheless present both Europe and the United States with critical, yet different policy challenges.

### **Europe: Confronting the Unexpected**

It is fair to say that at the 1999 meeting of the European Council in Helsinki, none of the Europeans actually expected Turkey to be able to pursue far-reaching institutional change in such a short period of time. Now that Turkey and the EU are involved in formally negotiating Ankara's membership, Europe is confronted with the vexing question of whether it wants to integrate a country of 74 million people who are overwhelmingly Muslim and, on average, significantly poorer than most EU citizens.

Although the European Commission recommended that Europe formally begin negotiating Turkey's entry into the Union in October 2004, Ankara's transition is not complete. The Europeans are correct to point to a series of economic, foreign policy, and domestic political issues that raise important questions about Turkey's candidacy. On the economic front, beyond the well-developed and westernized cities of the Aegean coast and the capital Ankara, Turkey is a largely rural, agrarian, undeveloped coun-

try.<sup>1</sup> The Europeans fear that Turkish membership will lead to mass migration of Turks into other EU member states.

On the foreign policy front, the continuing conflict in Cyprus is a primary source of friction between Ankara and Brussels. Since AKP came to power, it has consistently sought to take a more flexible position regarding the conflict than previous governments. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül counseled Turkish Cypriots and their leaders to accept the so-called Annan Plan when it was put to a referendum in the spring of 2004. In the event, 66 percent of Turkish Cypriots voted for the plan whereas three quarters of Greek Cypriots voted “no.” From the perspective of Ankara, since then the EU has failed to live up to commitments made to Turkish Cypriots that would have helped them break their international isolation. This has thus led to a hardening of the Turkish position on Cyprus. As a result, Ankara refuses to fulfill its own commitments to the EU by barring Greek Cypriot air and sea traffic from Turkish ports.

On domestic politics, Europe maintains serious reservations about what Brussels perceives to be institutional shortcomings that compromise the quality of Turkey’s democratic practices. For example, Article 301 of the penal code limits freedom of expression and has been used to target those who question long-held orthodoxies related to Turkey’s Kurdish minority and Turkish culpability for the killing of 1.5 million Armenians in Anatolia during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Well-known figures such as Turkish Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk and the French-Turkish writer Elif Şafak have been prosecuted for “insulting Turkishness” under the provisions of Article 301. In addition, Europeans are concerned about the continuing human rights abuses in Turkish police stations and prisons.

There is also the matter of Kurdish cultural rights. In 2004, Turkey formally lifted its ban on radio and television broadcasts in Kurdish dialects as well as its prohibition on education in Kurdish. While Kurds have access to an array of television programs in their language, including on state-run Turkish Radio and Television, problems remain in access to Kurdish education. State education bureaucrats have used a sudden meticulous adherence to legal measures such as fire code violations in an effort to shut down schools providing instruction about Kurdish culture in Kurdish language, thereby achieving political ends by alternative means.

Finally, the EU continues to criticize the role of the military establishment in Turkey’s political system. The Turks deserve credit for making significant changes that provide parliament with greater oversight over the military budget and downgrade the influence of the once seemingly all-powerful military-dominated *Milli Güvenlik Kurulu* (National Security Council). Yet, the Turkish General Staff retains the capacity to influence politics and maintains its self-endowed right to intervene directly in the political arena should the officers deem it necessary. Continuing prob-

<sup>1</sup> Turkey’s GDP per capita in 2006 was US\$5,400 as opposed to US\$29,000 per capita GDP for EU countries.

lems in civil-military relations were on full display in April 2007 when the military interfered in Turkey's scheduled presidential election. The General Staff, who issued a public ultimatum to the AKP government stating that there would be consequences should its candidate Abdullah Gül be elected, precipitated a constitutional crisis and intensified the perennial *kulturkampf* between Turkey's secularists and Islamists. Gül was ultimately elected president after a four-month delay and a demonstration of AKP's political power when it scored 47 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections held in July. Nevertheless, the military's actions in April raised real concerns about backsliding in Turkey's reform drive.

All of these concerns are valid, yet at the same time there are plausible resolutions to each of these issues. The greater problem, and the one left largely unsaid or to be communicated only indirectly, is the issue of faith. The central challenge for the EU is answering the first order question: Is Europe a Christian club or is it a union of countries that share common values, norms, and principles? To date, Europeans have not been able to agree upon an answer to this question. Nevertheless, it seems that most people within the EU, as well as the leaders of some of its most influential states (France's Nicolas Sarkozy and Germany's Angela Merkel, in particular), believe that there is no place for an overwhelmingly Muslim country in Europe.

There is no polling data suggesting that Europeans oppose Turkey's entry into the EU on outright religious grounds, though there are a variety of proxy indicators to conclude (as many Turks have done) that this is the case. For example, France plans to hold a referendum on Turkey's accession when the time comes for Ankara to sign an Accession Treaty – a measure that does not apply to any other EU applicant. In addition, a number of former members of the Soviet bloc, such as Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria, whose economic development lags Turkey and whose democratic traditions are suspect, have jumped ahead of Turkey in line to become members of Europe. Finally, the failed 2005 referendums in France and the Netherlands on the proposed EU constitutional treaty were largely regarded as a way of voicing the public's opposition to Turkey's membership.

There are three clear consequences of what seems to be Europe's rejection of Turkey on religious grounds. First, for the larger Muslim world, but particularly the Arab world, Turkey is a test case for how the West deals with the accumulation of Islamist political power in a Muslim society. If Turkey is left literally at the gates of Vienna, people and governments in the Middle East will perceive this as yet additional evidence that the West is hostile to Islam and Muslims. Second, the EU has been the anchor of Turkish reform. Given the structure of the Turkish political system, it is unlikely that the Turks could have undertaken significant reforms beginning in 2003 on their own. Indeed, Turkish leaders were very clear that they were pushing successive reform packages through the Grand National Assembly in order to meet European requirements. Without the incentives for change that the EU provides, the necessary widening and

deepening of Turkish democracy may not occur. Finally, it is likely that Turkey's failure to join the EU will produce an angry, insular, and nationalist society. This is not to suggest that Ankara will break its historic ties with NATO, but that it will be increasingly difficult for Europe (and the US) to achieve its interests in the Balkans, Caucuses, Middle East, and Central Asia without a Turkey that believes it is a full partner with the West.

### **The United States: Failing to Perceive Change**

The challenge for Washington emerging from Turkey is of an altogether different sort than the issues that Brussels confronts. Turkish foreign policy is changing, though it is less a function of the AKP and its ostensible Islamist agenda than three critical developments in and around Turkey and the international system over the last 15 years: first, the US invasion of Iraq has fundamentally altered the geo-strategic environment in Turkey's region; second, the increasing recognition that most of Europe does not want Turkey within the EU has led Turks to think either about strategic alternatives or to place emphasis on Turkey as a great power itself; and finally, with the disappearance of the Soviet threat, the primary issue that bound Turkey and the US together during the Cold War no longer exists. These structural changes, combined with the promises of greater policy-making transparency that AKP made when it came to office, have resulted in a more "normal" Turkish foreign policy.

Not only does public opinion matter more in Turkish foreign policy, Turkey's interests will also no longer necessarily coincide with those of the US. To be sure, Ankara and Washington share broad common goals in the stability of Iraq, Middle East peace, reconciliation in the Balkans, and energy policy. At the same time, however, the "normalization" of Turkish foreign policy will result in policies that the United States does not like. For example, just as Washington is seeking to isolate Tehran and Damascus, Ankara is developing ties with both countries. Indeed, the impetus that regime change in Iraq provided to Kurdish nationalism – an existential threat from Ankara's perspective – is driving the development of relations between Ankara and two previously troublesome neighbors, Tehran and Damascus, both of whom are also worried about a possible independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq. A more immediate challenge to all three countries is the problem of Kurdish terrorism. Turkey is under the most acute threat as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has increased the intensity of its attacks against Turkish forces along Turkey's border with Iraq. Both Syria and Iran have expressed solidarity with Turkey should Ankara decide to pursue PKK terrorists into Iraqi territory. The possibility of a Turkish military incursion is a grave concern for Washington, which fears a Turkish operation could undermine the relative stability of northern Iraq.

There is a tendency among some observers to attribute changes in Ankara's foreign policy to AKP's roots in Turkey's Islamist movement, specifically the *Milli Görüş* (National Outlook) movement, which sought closer

Turkish relations with the Muslim world at the expense of Turkey's Western orientation. This analysis prejudices the ostensible Islamism of the AKP. Given the structural changes in international politics that coincide roughly with the two wars against Iraq, it is clear that any Turkish government would be pursuing policies similar to those of the AKP. Moreover, if AKP were pursuing an Islamist agenda, it would not be seeking Turkey's entry into the EU.

Ultimately, Turkey's foreign policy is coming more into line with Atatürk's maxim of "Peace at home, peace in the world," which seeks good relations with all of its neighbors regardless of the character of their regimes. The great challenge for Washington is appreciating why this change in Turkish foreign policy is taking place while crafting a policy that takes advantage of the areas where the US shares interests with Turkey. Ankara literally sits at the geographic center of many of Washington's pressing foreign policy concerns. Turkey can play an important role in helping Washington achieve its interests, but only if the United States recognizes that as Turkey comes into its own as a political, economic, and diplomatic player, there will be differences between the two allies.