Islamists Approach Europe
Turkey's Islamist Danger

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Since their electoral landslide victory in November 2002, Islamists within Turkey's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) have camouflaged themselves as "democratic Islamic conservatives."[1] The AKP claims to be the Muslim equivalent of the Christian-Democratic parties of Western Europe. Such an analogy is false, however. What the AKP seeks is not "Islam without fear," to borrow the phrase of Trinity College professor Raymond Baker,[2] but rather a strategy for a creeping Islamization that culminates in a Shari'a (Islamic law) state not compatible with a secular, democratic order. The AKP does not advertise this agenda and often denies it. This did not convince the chief prosecutor of Turkey who, because of AKP efforts to Islamize Turkey, sought to ban the party and seventy-one of its leaders. While the AKP survived a ban, the majority of justices found that the AKP had worked to advance an Islamist agenda and undermine secularism.[3] Nevertheless, the AKP enjoys the backing of the United States and the European Union as well. Through its support for institutional Islamism in Turkey, the West loses its true friends: liberal Muslims.

Advance of Secularism
The processes of secularization predate the Kemalist revolution and trace back to the Tanzimat reforms, which Ottoman sultans began in the mid-nineteenth century. However, it was the Kemalist revolution that established real secularism in Turkey. Today, Turkey is the only one of fifty-seven majority Muslim states in which secularism is constitutionally enshrined. After establishing the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the caliphate, Shari'a courts, and other aspects of the Islamic legal system and religious order. The problem remains, however, that while the state is secular in terms of its full adoption of the Swiss legal code, such secularism does not extend to civil society, at least in terms of "open society."[4]

Constitutionally, Turkey is a secular state but, in reality, both Turkish civil society and its institutions are weak. In this sense, Turkey does not meet the democratic standards prevailing in the member states of the European Union. Turkish law guarantees neither freedom of religion nor freedom of speech. In 2005, Turkish authorities sought to prosecute prominent Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk for his remarks regarding the World War I-era deaths of Armenians.[5] The AKP has legislated a variety of reforms, but these remain more cosmetic than real.[6] Şerif Mardin, a political science professor at Sabancı University who is sympathetic to the AKP, argues that "Civil society is a Western dream ... [It] does not translate into Islamic terms."[7]

Still, Turkey is democratic. Despite coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980, Turkey has had thirteen competitive, national elections in the past half-century and more than twenty changes of ruling party. Next to Mali and Senegal, Freedom House ranks Turkey the freest majority Muslim country.[8] But, even if it compares favorably to other majority Muslim countries, Turkey is not a fully democratic state. Its national security council, Milli Güvenlik Kurulu (MGK), was long run by the military and is still dominated by the military.[9] While not the most democratic institution—the MGK could, in practice, overrule parliament—the organization has secured the secular character of Turkey much as Iran's Council of Guardians intervenes to ensure that country's Islamist character. Ironically, even as European officials applauded reforms that, in August 2004, bestowed a civilian head and civilian majority upon the MGK, Turkey has become less democratic.
Today, the AKP party with almost a two-thirds majority in parliament, rules Turkey like a one-party state. The party ignores the opposition and has abandoned efforts to reach out to any constituency beyond Anatolian Islamists. It awards state positions, for example, almost exclusively to Islamists.[10] Still, even as Ankara backslides away from democracy, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül leverage the European Union accession process to create an illusion of tolerance and reform.

**Turkey's Approach to Europe**

In a sense, the AKP's Islamism and European outreach illustrate a paradox in the way Muslims approach Europe: Either they favor Europeanization of Islam or Islamization of Europe.[11] With reform and accommodation, Islam can be compatible with democracy, but Islamism cannot. In the world of Islam, Islamism aims at reversing the process of cultural modernization. Today, acculturation and secularization are reversed into re-traditionalization, de-acculturation, and de-secularization. The ongoing de-Westernization in Turkish society is clear. There have been three Islamist parties since the 1970s with a real chance of acquiring power. All three were judicially invalidated—the Milli Selamet Partisi in 1980, the Refah Partisi in 1998, and the Fizelet Partisi in 2001—for the threat they posed to secularity in Turkey.[12]

Each of the Islamist leaders pursued different strategies. Neçmetten Erbakan who, as Refah leader, became Turkey's first Islamist prime minister, combined Islamism with neo-Ottomanism—an ideological revival of Ottoman glory—and pan-Turkish outlooks. The Erdoğan generation of Islamists, in contrast, presents itself in European terms, but its commitment to both Europe and democracy is instrumental. As Hudson Institute scholar Zeyno Baran explains, the AKP's commitment to democracy rests not on philosophical agreement with its principles but rather because "democratic elections ... [have] proven to be the easiest and most legitimate path to power."[13]

Europeanized Islam embraces the values of cultural modernity, pluralism, and secular tolerance. Secularism and religious tolerance have, in many ways, provided the basis of European cultural development. Despite its Christian roots, Europe has been secular since the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Polemics that insist that the European Union is reluctant to accept an Islamic country into its fold are false. Europe was Europeanized through "the spread of one particular culture."[14] There is no reason why Turkish assimilation into Europe could not Europeanize Turkey just as the EU has Europeanized Spain, Greece, Poland, and in part, Romania. Turkey, after all, is contiguous with Europe and shares a common Byzantine heritage with much of southern Europe, including not only the Balkan states but also much of Greece.

Ottoman modernity, however, never accepted the spirit of Europe. It was based on the adoption of European instruments and technology but the rejection of European values. Such instrumental Europeanization did not stabilize the Islamic-Ottoman rule but rather contributed to its downfall. The Kemalist revolution arose from the failure of the Young Ottomans and Young Turks. Atatürk's agenda was the Europeanization of Turkey, not only technologically but also with the adoption of cultural outlooks based on modern values and norms. The Kemalist revolution sought to give Turkey a civilizational identity defined not by religion but rather by cultural values shared with Europe: secularism, individual human rights, civil society, and the rule of law. The problem with Atatürk's Europeanization of Turkey was that the process was a revolution from above, imposing innovations on society
without providing the necessary cultural underpinning. By focusing on urban centers, it left the countryside barely affected. The result was a bifurcation of society: a European, urban culture in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, and a rural society deeply rooted in Islamic tradition.[15]

The AKP, however, does not accept Europeanization. Rather, AKP leaders pursue a double strategy: They verbally dissociate their party—and themselves—from political Islam while simultaneously embracing Islamic identity politics and, like many Islamist parties across the globe, also engaging in anti-Christian polemics.[16] The AKP uses education as its major instrument to further Islamist identity politics, introduce reinvented Islamic values, and de-Westernize society. And while the AKP claims secular credit for pursuing Turkey’s EU membership, it defames Europe as an exclusionary "club of Christians."[17] Since its November 2002 accession, the AKP has engaged in a "creeping Islamization."[18] The AKP has sought to further this through politics of cultural Islamization, especially in education and media. Erdoğan has worked to expand Anatolian culture in the cities, helped by internal migration. The slums and shanty towns have become the AKP’s chief base of support.

**Needed: Islam's Europeanization**

The problem of both Turkey’s entry into the European Union and the Turkish diaspora in Europe is not Islam itself but rather how to encourage the Turkish diaspora's Europeanization. If Turkey were to become a secular, European-style democracy, it would face no obstacles to European Union accession, nor would such a strong boundary exist between Turkey and Europe if Turkey's religion were a more civil Islam.[19]

What Turkey needs is not simply a laundry list of civil reforms but Europeanization of Islam. There is nothing European about the ghettos of Turkish migrants living in Islamic enclaves in Berlin suburbs such Neuköln and Kreuzberg. These "Muslim enclaves"—including the Turkish ones—are "in the West, but not of it."[20] The AKP encourages such a division, though. In February 2008, Erdoğan labeled assimilation of Turks a "crime against humanity."[21] The Turkish diaspora in Europe remains antagonistic to their new home. The two major Turkish mosques in Germany—in Pforzheim and Bremen—are named Fatih (conqueror) after Ottoman Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror who, in 1453, captured the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, modern day Istanbul.

Most Turks in Germany are not integrated into civil society. If Turkey, as the AKP sees it, enters the European Union, it would resemble more the Kreuzberg and Neuköln enclaves than the European parts of Istanbul or Ankara. While Erdoğan says his decision to guide Turkey toward Europe is firm, declaring, for example, that "Turkey has no other alternative than the full membership of the EU,"[22] it is less certain whether Europe could absorb a country ruled by Islamists.

The question of whether Turks can or will adopt a Europeanized Islam is crucial because demography and migration suggest that Europe will be dealing with Turkey for years to come. Turkish migration westward is not simply a twentieth and twenty-first century phenomenon but part of a larger pattern that began almost a millennium ago.[23] Many Turks joined Ottoman incursions into southeast Europe for opportunity and adventure.[24] Turkey's European Union accession would lead to a similar movement of population. The European Union's living standard and generous welfare system will attract Turkey's rural population, which suffers from an unemployment rate between 20 and 30 percent, and where many
do not receive welfare benefits. Indeed, some Turkish politicians have suggested that this migration should make Turkey more attractive to Europe arguing that Turkey can offer Europe, with its aging and declining populations, a young Turkish population. There is something to this. Turkish population figures have doubled since 1970 while Western European states have a shrinking population due to low birth rates and an aging population. No doubt, migration would be an advantage for Europe, as much as it has been for the United States, provided that Europe, like the United States, assimilates its immigrants.

Given the AKP's instrumental approach to EU accession, it is ironic that while the European public largely opposes Turkey's accession, European diplomats still push the Turks to undermine the three pillars of the secular republic—the military, judiciary, and educational system—purportedly to make Turkey fit into the European Union. While European officials couch their prescribed reforms in the language of transformational diplomacy and democracy promotions, they ignore that Islamists only accept democracy as the rule of the majority, not as a culture of pluralism. At the World Economic Forum in Davos in 1999, the late prime minister Bülent Ecevit responded to European criticism of the imbalance of power between the parliament and the MGK by explaining, "In your countries, the political culture of secularism is well established, and therefore, there is no need for a guardian to protect it. In my country, Turkey, secularism still lacks firm foundations and can always be threatened, therefore the need to protect it."

The Turkish writer Murat Çakır described the Islamists as "pseudo-democrats," who use democracy as a cover for the promotion of Islamization whether in Turkey itself or among the Turkish diaspora in Europe. He observes that Ankara does not contribute to Europeanizing the Turkish Muslim diaspora. Mosques, built and administered by the Turkish state through the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (directorate of religious affairs), are not European even if they are moderate in comparison to the more militant Milli Görüş mosques. The difference between the Diyanet and Milli Görüş mosques, however, has eroded since AKP accession led to its control of the Diyanet.

The secular commitment to democracy and to its values does not register in the Islamist model of an Islamic state (din-ü-devlet), which the AKP's actions show it accepts. Why then have Western policies toward Turkey not changed under AKP rule? Part of the problem is that Europe does not have a clear awareness of its civilizational identity. In contrast, migrants and Turkey itself strongly cultivate civilizational awareness in their own identity politics. The Islamist challenge and the potential of Islamization are based on facts, but they are not well understood in Europe. The Turkish diaspora in Europe, as well as the population in Turkey itself, is caught between Europeanization and Islamization. The European decision-makers have proven in the past to be incapable of designing policies to address challenges arising from ethnic-cultural diversification of the population. European officials neglect or simply ignore cultural issues such as the identity of Europe and Europeanization.

The AKP Abandons Compromise

Compromising and power sharing are an essential part of democratic politics. Repeated experience with Islamists show that they go to the ballots but fail to compromise when they win. The AKP is no exception. Erdoğan wanted to promote his foreign minister, Abdullah Gül, to the presidency in 2007, and he did so at the expense of a traditional process of consensus-building among opposition parties and so sparked a political crisis. While the AKP won subsequent parliamentary
elections, its victory had as much to do with the weakness of the secularist parties as with satisfaction with the AKP. The 2007 election win enabled the AKP to retrench, sending Gül to Çankaya palace as the first non-secular president of Turkey.

With its majority solidified and no longer fearing the veto of a secular president, the AKP accelerated its de-secularization of Turkish society. Here, the head scarf is especially important. Among Islamists, the head scarf is not just an article of clothing but an icon of civilizational divide. Islamists view the head scarf as a provision of the Shari’a.[30] It has become symbolic of the tension between Europeanization and Islamization. In a 2004 ruling, the European Court of Human Rights found the right to a head scarf not to be a human right, thus dismissing an Islamist lawsuit.[31] Upon their reelection, though, the AKP decided to provoke secular elites with legislation enabling female university students to wear a head scarf on campus and in classes. On June 5, 2008, the Turkish Supreme Court deemed the AKP’s law to be unconstitutional on the grounds that it eroded Turkey’s secular character.[32] Soon after, the London-based pan-Arabic daily Al-Hayat quoted Erdoğan as stating, "We are going to shut down the constitutional court."[33] Many Europeans have cheered Erdoğan and condemned court actions in Turkey. AKP partisans in the Turkish press and proponents of Turkey as a model of moderate Islam in the United States and Europe labeled Turkish secularists as "fascists" and accused them of undermining "democratic" Islamists.[34] Zeyno Baran observed that such an artificial dichotomy "inadvertently strengthens hard-line Islamists."[35] As the West sides with the Islamists, the opposition, feeling abandoned, has become more anti-Western. Again, Baran explains, "The opposition's anti-Western stand is more like that of a lover with a broken heart ... [they] fear that Europeans push them to undertake reforms that will make Turkey more Islamic, and then will tell them that they are too Islamic to join a Western club."[36]

The crisis continued into the summer as the Constitutional Court heard arguments that the AKP had violated the principles of a democratic and secular Turkish republic.[37] Had the court dissolved the party, it would have toppled the government and plunged the country into political turmoil.[38] The court wanted to avoid this outcome as it would have ended the AKP but not the Islamist challenge. The AKP could simply have transferred its assets to another party and reemerged under a new name, just as the AKP had emerged from the ashes of Fezilet. The court did not acquit the AKP, however, but instead gave it a strong warning to stop steering Turkey away from the secular order that the constitution mandates towards an Islamic one. Court president Haşim Kiliç stated, "There is no verdict on closure ... However, in this ruling a serious warning has been issued to the party [AKP], and I hope this conclusion will be elevated and will be taken accordingly."[39]

**Secularism Abandoned**

Western politicians, scholars, and opinion leaders barely understand what is going on in Turkey. Too many Western pundits depict Turkey’s increasing Islamism as fortuitous. The Rand Corporation’s Stephen Larrabee, for example, wrote, "Under the AKP, Turkey has emerged as an important diplomatic actor in the region ... without the AKP ... the United States would lose an important partner in trying to stabilize this volatile region ... At the same time, banning the party could undercut efforts to promote reform and democracy in the Middle East."[40] Such views infuriate secular Turks. It is ironic that the intra-Turkish debate on the pernicious nature of Islamism has been more open than the Western one.
In the name of democratic reforms, as European diplomats have observed, the AKP has reduced the secular impact of the army, defamed judicial defense of the constitution as a "judicial coup," expanded the Imam Hatip religious schools and equated them to secular schools, and fired university presidents. Too many in the West praise the AKP as "moderate Islamic." The only difference, however, between moderate and jihadist Islamists is the use of the ballot box instead of violence to come to power. It may be important to include Islamists in democracy but certainly not with the Western naive notion that inclusion will tame Islamism. This is the lesson that should be drawn from Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and certain Islamist parties in Iraq.

Hamas and Hezbollah may be represented in parliaments, but they have kept their militias that represent the antithesis of democracy. They show how their embrace of the democratic game is only a tactical step. The AKP may be better than Hamas and Hezbollah since it has no militia although its dominance and use of the police force and secret services have become nearly as abusive.

The proper solution for crisis-ridden Turkey is neither the tacit Islamic law of the AKP nor a coup by the Turkish secularists. Rather, the European Union and the United States should encourage the strengthening of civil society by making the weak institutions of Turkish democracy stronger. Moderate Islamists want to Islamize, not democratize.[41] They are committed to the procedure of democracy but not to its pluralistic and peaceful political culture. Political Islam in Turkey is an important issue for Europe. Turkey not only has close relations to the West, but it also has a diaspora of more than four million in the European Union.[42] While many moderate Muslims seek to Europeanize Islam, the Islamism practiced by the AKP is an ideology of cultural divide, tension, and conflict, despite all of the pro-Europe rhetoric in which Islamists in Turkey engage in their pursuit to exploit the European Union for their agenda of Islamization.

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[22] Welt Online (Berlin), *Feb. 11, 2008*.


[34] See, for example, Mustafa Akyol, "The Threat Is Secular Fundamentalism," *The International Herald Tribune*, *May 4, 2007*.


[36] Ibid.


[38] The International Herald Tribune, *July 30, 2008*.


Europe’s flawed approach to Arab democracy. By Richard Youngs. The European Union’s efforts to promote political reform in North Africa and the Middle East are running into the ground. Commission proposals to include moderate Islamists within EU-sponsored networks are invariably blocked by Southern Mediterranean governments, with feeble reactions from other EU states.