

**PERSPECTIVES**

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**LOSING TURKEY? WHY TURKEY'S FOREIGN  
POLICY IS CHANGING AND WHAT IT MEANS  
FOR THE WEST**

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## **Losing Turkey?**

### **Why Turkey's foreign policy is changing and what it means for the West**

**Gwenyth Todd**

Over the last twelve months, observers of Turkish politics have been struck by what appear to be significant and sudden shifts in Turkish foreign policy, amongst them, Turkey's estrangement from its once-close relationship with Israel and its pursuit of better relations with Iran and Syria. In truth, these changes reflect both recent factors and a culmination of longer-term processes within Turkey that are challenging the country's secular and pro-Western orientation. From a Western perspective, the old assumption that Turkey would be a faithful supporter of Western interests can no longer be relied upon as a more independent and assertive Turkey emerges.

#### **The AKP ascendant**

The shifts taking place in Turkish foreign policy reflect, first and foremost, the influence of the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinmasi or AKP*) led by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul. Over the past eight years the AKP, like its more overtly Islamist predecessors, has fought a long-running battle with the guardians of Turkish secularism, in particular the military and the judiciary. Their opponents successfully invoked the great Turkish founding leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's insistence on separating religion from politics in establishing modern Turkey from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Those who attempted to reintroduce Islam into politics were met with swift, and sometimes harsh, opposition from Western-oriented politicians, backed by Turkey's formidable military.

Yet over time the boundaries separating overtly Muslim Turks from holding positions of political and military power were slowly eroded. The Islamist AKP has been increasingly in the ascendant in recent years, buoyed by an extraordinary economic boom that brought sudden prosperity to the country. The AKP has also enjoyed strong popular support from formerly politically disenfranchised villagers and farmers who moved westward seeking opportunity in Istanbul, Ankara and other major Turkish cities.

On 12 September 2010, the AKP won a significant victory in a national referendum that endorsed major constitutional changes. Ostensibly designed to pave the way for Turkey's admission into the European Union (EU), these changes will bring the Turkish Constitution into line with EU standards. At the same time, they will also impose significant limits on the role of the military and judiciary in Turkish politics and on their ability to fend off the AKP's challenges to Turkish secularism. Indeed, there can be little doubt that this referendum marks a watershed moment for the secular Turkish state established in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

In the past the AKP has been cautious about challenging the fundamentals of Turkish foreign policy, especially those seen as important by the military, most notably Turkey's extensive political and military relationship with Israel. That recent changes in Turkish foreign policy should be increasingly at odds with these fundamentals should not, however, come as a surprise. There had been earlier indications that AKP leaders were not prepared to follow in the foreign policy footsteps of the AKP's more secular and pro-Western predecessors. In 2003, the Turkish Parliament narrowly voted against allowing US forces to pass through Turkey in preparation for Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the past, the United States had been able to rely on secularists in the Turkish Parliament, often under pressure from US supporters in the Turkish military, to ensure that initiatives critical to US interests were approved, often regardless of overall Turkish public opinion. The 2003 parliamentary vote made clear that this would no longer be the case.

In spite of US disappointment over the Iraq vote, Turkey's Western allies agreed that EU membership for Turkey was critical to maintain Turkey's Western orientation. They were prepared to accept moderate inconveniences like the 2003 parliamentary vote if it ultimately led to a stable and prosperous Turkey. As long as Turkey's government remained committed to EU accession, many in the West felt that devout Muslims in Turkey's government were no more a threat to Turkey's democracy than devout Christian politicians were to Western democracies. What these Western reform advocates failed to contemplate, however, was the direction an Islamist Turkish government might adopt if the EU rejected Turkish membership, or indeed if Turks came to feel that they were likely to be rejected by the EU.

The changes in Turkey's political environment have occurred relatively rapidly. In 2007 the AKP's Abdullah Gül was elected President. Gül's election to Turkey's highest office, while a victory for Turkish democracy, demoralised secularists, many of whom seemed willing to forsake Turkey's democratic consolidation to prevent the country from becoming what they feared would be an Islamic state. For their part, Islamists throughout Turkey were elated and

energised. Subtle changes in Turkey's approach to foreign policy became increasingly apparent. Many observers pointed with alarm to increasing tension in Turkey's relationship with Israel, a once-close ally. The most dramatic example of a policy shift occurred on May 31 2010, when Turkish ships, backed by the AKP government, participated in an international convoy carrying food and supplies to the Palestinians of Gaza. Israeli military commandos forcibly boarded and turned back the convoy, with nine Turks dying in the process, creating a diplomatic crisis. The AKP's willingness to challenge Israel was a clear signal to the Muslim world that Turkey was no longer remaining neutral in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Change was also apparent on other fronts as Turkey refused to support the United Nations Security Council's vote on a fourth round of sanctions against Iran, breaking ranks with both the United States and the EU, and demonstrating the AKP's willingness to depart from the West's strategy and even place itself at odds with the EU.

While one can debate whether the AKP is pursuing a more Islamist line, it is clear that the ruling party feels less and less bound by the pro-Western traditions of Turkish foreign policy. Although much of Turkey's Anatolian Muslim population is more oriented to the culture of the Arab world and Iran, Turkey's secular population has been oriented toward the liberal values of Europe, and previous Turkish governments often looked at Turkey's regional neighbours like Russia, Iran and Syria with even more scepticism and animosity than the United States and other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies. Today, however, the AKP government is engaging openly and independently with these states, including Iran, to the West's chagrin, under its so-called 'no problems' policy with its neighbours.

Some have dubbed the AKP's foreign policy shift as 'Neo-Ottomanism', because it seeks the creation of a cooperative area extending over areas once controlled by the Ottoman Empire, from the Balkans well into the Middle East, with Turkey playing the leading role. To pave the way, the AKP has undertaken various initiatives, including indicating a readiness to discuss the issue of divided Cyprus, offering renewed openings to Greece (with whom it has longstanding disputes), proposing new protocols with Armenia (with whose people it has been at odds for over a century), and courting Syria and Iran. Superficially, this vision appears to fulfill the idea of Turkey as a bridge between East and West, long-hoped for by some in the West, but it is a bridge built on Turkish and not Western terms.

### **Other factors**

The AKP's ascendancy is not, however, the only factor explaining these shifts in Turkish foreign policy. Public attitudes undoubtedly play a much greater role than they once did. Turkey's estrangement from Israel is a particular example of the way in which the AKP has

responded to – but also reinforced – popular antipathy. Growing disillusionment among Turks about prospects for admission to the EU also plays a part. Growing prejudice against Muslims in Europe, and anti-Islamic feelings following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, have widened this breach and have made the AKP's assertion of a more independent and less pro-Western foreign policy line possible.

Perceptions of declining US power and influence in the Middle East, in particular, since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, have also played a part in a more assertive Turkish posture in the Middle East. Turkey is not alone in the region, however, in responding to signs of US frailty. America's enemies, most notably Iran, have attempted to step into the perceived breach, but even US allies have felt a need to launch their own diplomatic initiatives – for example the Arab Initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – in the absence of what they regard as sufficient American effort.

The Global Financial Crisis has been another factor in changing the traditional orientation of Turkish foreign policy. As more traditional Turkish markets in the West decline, Turkey has come to rely even more on increased trade and investment with Russia and Middle Eastern Muslim countries. Some in the Turkish secular establishment find this new Eastward economic focus unsettling. Yet the reality is that the stellar performance of the Turkish economy at a time of grave economic hardship in Europe and Turkey's new trade linkages with the East make Turkey less and less reliant on the West economically. Turkey's economy reported an 11.4% expansion for the first quarter of 2010, second only to China. Indeed, if it were a member of the EU, Turkey would more closely meet the economic criteria for accession to the Eurozone than most existing EU countries.<sup>1</sup>

More generally, the crisis has eroded the West's economic credibility in Turkey. Thus, instead of following US advice and adopting traditional IMF austerity programs to deal with looming financial crisis, Prime Minister Erdogan has chosen to pursue cautious financial reforms without resorting to IMF support. Critics of the AKP approach are quick to point out that Turkey continues to suffer from high unemployment, a growing trade deficit and a reduction in private savings, and question how this will affect the Turkish economy in the long term. Yet in the celebratory atmosphere surrounding Turkey's weathering thus far of the Global Financial Crisis, PM Erdogan has skillfully managed to win credit from the Turkish public for Turkey's economic boom while steering the blame for any continuing problems on to the West.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jr., Landon, Turkey, turning to the East, asserts economic power. *The New York Times*, 5 July 2010.

### **Between democracy and expediency**

Turkey's traditional Western allies have reacted with a mixture of alarm and confusion to Turkey's recent foreign policy shifts. Until recently, many, like the United States, had been prepared to sacrifice more expedient relations in the hope of cementing democratic change in Turkey. The United States and others, for example, warned the military against overreacting to Gül's presidency, insisting on a 'wait and see' approach as opposed to the military threats and public demonstrations typical of past secular opposition to Islamist advances. Yet the AKP's democratic record is not without its blemishes.

While there is much to applaud about democratic reforms and economic successes under Erdoğan, one ominous aspect of the AKP's governing style has been the measures to which it has resorted in order to quell opposition from the military and secularists. The highly polarised social and political environment makes maintaining order without relying on oppressive tactics difficult for the ruling AKP party, which has responded by stepping up security throughout Turkey.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, the Ministry of Justice admitted to tapping 70,000 private phones. Some upscale restaurants have gone as far as establishing mobile phone check-booths so the government cannot listen in on conversations during meals. Media outlets opposing the AKP face severe penalties, as evidenced by the US\$2.5 billion fine levied against the secularist Doğan Media Group, whose widely-read *Hürriyet* daily newspaper has been critical of the AKP.

The AKP government has also used the ongoing Ergenekon<sup>3</sup> investigation into an alleged 2003 plot by the secular establishment to overthrow it against political opponents. The conspiracy is based on the 2007 discovery of an arms cache and documents in an Istanbul shantytown, suggesting a wide-ranging effort to undermine Turkey's Islamists through violence.<sup>4</sup> Top military and civilian figures have been accused of participating in the conspiracy, as well as supporting narcotics trafficking, terror groups and political assassinations. Through the arrest of over 200 journalists, writers, military personnel, gang leaders, scholars, businessmen and politicians, the AKP has strategically used the Ergenekon investigation to silence political opposition, and has managed the sometimes contradictory

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<sup>2</sup> Kaya, M.K and Karaveli, Halil M. Local election results reveal a fractured Turkey, *The Turkey Analyst, Bi-weekly Briefing* 2 (7), 10 April 2009, pp 3-5.

<sup>3</sup> Ergenekon is the name of the mythical heartland of the Turkic peoples in the 6th Century (the Sky-Turks, founders of modern-day Turkey, were led from the Ergenekon valley in the Altay mountains by a she-wolf named Asena. Politically, it symbolises the ultra-nationalist right-wing segment of Turkish society.

<sup>4</sup> Jenkins, Gareth, *Between fact and fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon investigation*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, August 2009.

allegations in the 5,000-plus page indictment by implying that anyone who questions them is a part of the conspiracy.

### **Future directions**

Predicting how changes in Turkey and in its foreign policy will play out in coming years is difficult. One key factor will be what happens with regard to EU accession. What western reform advocates have failed to contemplate is the direction an Islamist Turkish government might adopt if the EU rejects Turkish membership. Western calculations about Turkey's future are based on the assumption that the EU will admit Turkey, an increasingly unlikely proposition given rising anti-Islamic sentiment in various EU countries. If the unspeakable should happen and the EU rejects Turkey, it would hardly be surprising if Turkey turned towards Eastern Muslim allies, including Iran and Syria, at the expense of the West.

While the EU has applauded the 12 September referendum passage as a step toward Turkish accession, many obstacles remain, not least growing antipathy towards Muslims in Europe. The irony is that passage of the referendum may well increase the wearing of headscarves and face veils in Turkey at a time when many European countries are discussing or implementing bans on the veil. Obstruction by the EU will probably see the AKP government continue to distance itself from the West and NATO.

This is not to say that new foreign policy directions will be easy for Turkey to pursue. In the past, Turkey's ability to straddle East and West has been a key asset, not least because Turkey was able to combine a respected role in the Islamic world with the benefits of large Western aid programs and military assistance. It is by no means clear that Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbours will easily allow it to assume a position of regional leadership, regardless of – and perhaps because of – Prime Minister Erdogan's growing popularity in the region. And even as Ankara improves relations with countries such as Iran and Syria, it is by no means clear that long-standing regional disputes, such as those involving the constant threat of military conflict with Greece over control of the Aegean waterways and the ongoing division of the island of Cyprus, will not again come to the fore. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Turkey is rapidly emerging as a strong, independent and enigmatic player which will likely have the power to force a rethinking of regional economic, military and political strategies among all interested parties.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

***Gwenyth Todd*** is an international security consultant with extensive experience in Turkey, the Middle East and South America. She served for many years at the Pentagon, advising Secretaries of Defense under George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton on defence matters involving Iraq, Kuwait, Turkey, Cyprus and South America before being transferred to the White House National Security Council under President Clinton, where she served as Director for Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Libya. She subsequently formed her own company and served as a private consultant to the U.S. Navy on force protection and political developments in the countries along the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean, and Arabian Sea until moving to Australia in 2008. She holds degrees in Turkish and Arabic from the University of California at Berkeley and Georgetown University and is fluent in French and Spanish. She currently resides in Canberra.

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