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Observations of Turkish Islamist Politics:

Islamic Democrats or Enemies of Turkish Secularism?

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Having just returned from Istanbul as part of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces Industry Study Group, I was exposed to diverse opinions from Turkey's media, political groups, and social advocates whose political persuasion range from Kemalist and Leftist to Islamist. This essay takes this week-long experience and attempts to make sense of where the Turkish Islamist experiment has been and where it is going in the 21st century. This thought piece is also timely given the recent attempts by Turkish Islamist groups combined with Palestinian supporters attempting to run the Israeli maritime blockade of Gaza using Turkish flagged ships.

Turkey is a key member of NATO and stands poised to undertake the first successful experiment in Islamic democracy; it is a political vision abhorred by al-Qaida, yet could serve as a model for Arab Islamist political groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Peace and Justice Party (AKP) is using the democratic process to reorganize the social contract that has left two institutions as dominant over the executive and legislative branches in Turkey. Those two institutions are the military and the judiciary, whose senior leadership view themselves as the protectors of the legacy of Turkey's founder Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938). Yet Ataturk cannot be described as a secularist but one who admires laicism, a form of secularism that leaves no room for religious expression in public life. Laicism was inspired by the French Revolution and views expressions of God or the divine on currency or, in opening legislative sessions as intolerable.

Necmettin Erbakan: Turkey's Islamist Founding Father

To understand the Turkish experimentation with modern Islamism, it is vital to comprehend Kemalism, the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, and Najm al-Din Arbakan (Necmettin Erbakan in the Turkish script and hereafter Erbakan). Born in 1926 to a prestigious lineage that traces to Seljuk Princes, Erbakan grew up in the city of Sinop. His family steeped him in the glories of the Ottoman Empire and ancestors who served as advisers and ministers to that empire. He likely viewed the destruction of the empire and abolishment of the caliphate two years before his birth as an historic catastrophe. In 1943, Erbakan graduated high school and by 1953 earned a doctorate in mechanical engineering. His first experience outside Turkey was Germany, where he traveled as a visiting professor on loan from Istanbul University. He experimented with improving the efficiency of military tank engines and researched the ability to produce an engine that would run on different octane levels of fuel. Erbakan attained full professorship at 29 and in 1960 founded Silver Motors, a company that specialized in manufacturing diesel engines.[1]

Erbakan's drift into Islamist politics was initially motivated by what he saw was an economic clash between a government who assumed more control over free trade and those wanting more freedom of religious expression and trade practices. His business failed to thrive due to government meddling, taxation, and illicit bribes to attain licenses. He began spinning a narrative that this was a social struggle between Freemasons and those wanting a return to Turkish traditional values. In 1969, Erbakan ran as an Islamist candidate to Parliament representing Konia and won. Bolstered by this win, he formed the National Party and would subsequently use Islamist identity politics to challenge Freemasonry, and communists. In 1970, he gave a speech challenging the status quo of the media, trade, and economy being under the control of the government and called for Turks to stand as one against what he called a maelstrom. Erbakan challenged Turks to draw on their glorious past and their Eastern (versus Western) destiny. The Turkish army generals cracked down on Erbakan's party, and the National Security Court criminalized the group under the charge of negating Turkey's secular constitution and operating to undermine the founding principles of Kemal Ataturk.[2]

Erbakan underwent two years of political exile and in 1972 returned to establish the National Peace Party. This was a clandestine group until 1973, when the Turkish government declared a general amnesty for political prisoners. Seizing upon this political openness, the National Peace Party captured 48 seats in Parliament, and was courted by the Justice Party that captured 149 seats and the Popular Republican Party that possessed 186 seats. The electoral gains of the National Peace Party were eroded by 1977, and Erbakan resorted to street politics, organizing a Jerusalem Day march with hundreds of thousands of protestors. These protests were among the justifications used by Chief of General Staff General Kenan Ervin to conduct the 1980 coup that ushered in three years of military rule; hundreds of thousands were rounded up. The late 1970s was one of the most politically violent periods of Turkish politics – a Cold War in miniature fought between Western- and Soviet- backed political parties. It is estimated 5,000 died from 1975 to 1980, an average of ten political murders a day. Erbakan was imprisoned as the military banned communism, fascism, separatism, and religious sectarianism. Erbakan emerged in the mid-1980s and established the Refah (Welfare) Party in 1996; it won 185 seats in parliament, and Suleiman Demriel requested Erbakan form a government.

Supreme Court, the Generals and the Islamists: Balancing Democracy and Secularism Turkish Style

From 1996 to the present, Islamists, the Courts, and the Turkish generals have struggled for the political dominance of the country. In 1997, Erbakan advocated the construction of a massive mosque in Istanbul's Taksem Square, overshadowing a massive statue of Ataturk. The Refah Party also attempted to place a mosque amidst Turkey's secular institutions in Ankara's Cenkya District. Erbakan's alliance with Tansu Ciller's (1946-Present) Party split, to the delight of the generals. In late 1997, Turkey's Supreme Court declared the Refah Party illegal for attempting to change Turkey's secular character. The sentence was to ban Erbakan from political activities for 5 years. The military's popular appeal was shaken during this time by their advocacy for more robust relations with Israel. The military relationship with Israel came in advance of poplar acceptance of the Jewish state. Erbakan anticipated the dismantling of the Refah Party and created an underground quasi-Islamist party called Fadillah. It would be unveiled and led by an Islamist leader not tainted by imprisonment or political bans. It is within

Fadillah that Abdullah Gul developed. In 2001, it was declared anti-secular. From these remnants emerged the AKP, under Recep Erdogan (1954-Present) who first made gains in the Istanbul municipality. Erdogan and Gul are children of Erbakan.[3]

In 2002, Erdogan affirmed his commitment to the separation of religion from the state. The current Prime Minister Erdogan began as an activist for the National Peace Party, an organizer for the Refah Party, a branch chief for Istanbul in the Fadillah Party, and finally in 1994 won his first electoral victory as mayor of Istanbul. In 1998, the National Security Court jailed Erdogan for inciting sectarianism in Turkey. His case hung on a few ballads of poetry within a speech stating "the minarets are our speakers, those who pray our soldiers."[4] In 2001, Erdogan was released from prison and joined Abdullah Gul (1950-Present); together they re-invented the Justice and Development Party (AKP) not as a religious party in the style of the Middle East, but as a conservative party in the European Christian Democrats model. Erdogan advocated Turkey's admission into the European Union (EU). However Erdogan and the AKP understand that EU admission means rejecting military interference in government and allowing the free practice of religion. These two ideas underline Turkish laicism. On a personal note, Erdogan sent his daughter to university in the United States because Turkish policies of laicism (ultra-secularism) forbid the wearing of the *hejab* (headscarf) in Turkish public universities.

2010: Turks Discuss Taboo Political Subjects

What comes out of careful observation of Turkish Islamist politics is no less than the Islam's first experimentation with a democracy that has an Islamic character. Turkish intellectuals today are dealing with difficult, painful, and politically charged concepts. In my travels with the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, I heard discussions on such topics as the Ottoman role in the Armenian genocide, the cessation of calling Turkish Kurds Mountain Turks, and an acknowledgement of their grievances. I also observed a debate on the wisdom of Turkey's admission into the EU, in light of economic meltdown brought about by Greece. Turks' discussion of civil control of the military; the privileges of senior military officers as untouched by law; and the abuse of the clause by the Supreme Court deeming all legislation voted on but disliked by the court as being in violation of Turkey's secularism and used as a means of dominating Turkey's polity – all were in open display. Such discussions would have been impossible in the 1990s. Yet this positive political climate of discussion has come under the administration of the Islamists.

Today, provisions in the Turkish constitution on preserving secularism are used by the Supreme Court to negate any law passed by the legislator deemed as against secularism. This general proviso allows the Supreme Court to dominate the parliament. Judges in Turkey are appointed, not elected, by fellow judges. It is as if the Supreme Court of the United States were to logjam any legislation passed by the Congress. In addition, the Turkish military looms as a presence and state within a state in Turkish public policies. The Islamist AKP Party is attempting to challenge this arrangement with the military and Supreme Court today which has led to such political clashes as the Ergenekon Plot, which involved active and retired military officers attempting the overthrow of the elected Islamist government. An official investigation was launched in 2007, and stories appear weekly on the conspirators and the progress of the criminal case. One alleged plot was a plan to bomb mosques and blame the AKP for losing

control of security, thereby enabling a military takeover and suspension of democracy. Anti-AKP groups argue the whole plot was orchestrated by the AKP as a means of asserting civil control over the military.

Conclusion

In its dealings with Turkey, the United States must distinguish the difference between Islam, Islamist and Militant Islamist. With the Militant Islamist, there are no negotiations to be had; with the Islamist, as they are a wider group, we must discern their persuasion. Is the Islamist in question the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood? The Saudi Wahhabis? The Pakistani Jamiat e-Islami? Or the Turkish AKP? Each group possesses its own regional history, experiences, and ideology; such nuances are crucial for American policymakers to comprehend. Engaging in talks with Islamist political groups does not signify any commitment to their ideals, but allows one to challenge their notions, such as what interpretation of Islam does the AKP espouse? How does the AKP view Ottoman revivalism? Does this neo-Ottomanism place strains on the relationship with Arab nations, some of whom viewed with disdain their treatment as second class citizens. What does Islamic democracy mean in the imagination of the AKP? How will other Muslim and non-Muslim minorities be treated in an Islamic democracy? Posing such questions and getting answers from AKP leaders can only enhance understanding, particularly in light of Turkey and Brazil crafting alternate agreements with Iran in turning over portions of nuclear materials. This agreement is seen as undermining America's attempt to impose sanctions on Iran. These nuances and an understanding of the AKP, as well as its own version of Islamic democracy matter. Consider a 2007 study by a Turkish think tank, which reports significant tension around the issue of laicism, with 20 percent placing themselves in the secular end and 49 percent in the Islamist end of the survey. 32 percent indicated that religious fundamentalism that is supportive of the state in on the rise, while 23 percent thought that Turkish secularism is under threat.[5] The acceptance of religious based political parties is on the rise, from 25 percent in 1999 to 41 percent in 2006.[6] What do these trends mean to American relations with Turkey?

Commander Aboul-Enein is author of Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat, published this summer by Naval Institute Press. He spent one week this spring in Turkey as part of the Industry Study Program of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces.
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[1] Tahan, Ahmed. *Harakat Islamiyah bain al-Fitna wal-Jihad* translated as Islamic Movements between Division and (Armed) Jihad (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Marifah Publications, 2007), 177-183.
[2] Ibid, 185
[3] Ibid, 186
[4] Ibid, 187
[5] Carkoglu, Ali and Toprak, Binnaz. Religion, *Society, and Politics in a Changing Turkey* (Istanbul, Turkey: Tesev Publications, 2007), 13
[6] Ibid, 101