

Analysis

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Summary: The approach to “the West” occupied a central place in Turkish Political Islam’s identity formulation and distinguished them from other “systemic” parties. Nevertheless, Turkish Political Islam’s stance on the “West” has not been static. Instead, the character of the relations has acquired new shapes and dynamism, particularly in the late 1990s and 2000s. For a better understanding of the evolution, it is necessary to divide the time-span from the Welfare Party to the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) into distinguishable periods. These periods can be described as going from rejection of political Islam of the West to its enthusiastic embrace, and from co-existence to uncertainty. Currently, opposing trends have been set in motion simultaneously, and ambiguity rules Turkey’s relations with the West.

Turkey’s Political Islam and the West: The Evolving Nature of a Relationship

by Galip Dalay

Introduction

“The West” has been a contentious topic for the Islamic Movements all across the Muslim World. This was largely resulted from historical interactions (such as colonialism) between the West and Muslim-majority world. Indeed, some of these movements first emerged as anti-colonial resistance movements. The West, therefore, has constituted Political Islam’s¹ political other.

Turkey does not have a history of being colonized, therefore Turkey’s Political Islam (TPI) lacks some of the historical memories common to other Islamic Movements. Moreover, Turkey’s experience with the West, unique among all Muslim countries, where Westernization and modernization was regarded as interchangeable and pursued as state policy for

majority of republican history, sets TPI apart from other examples. In spite of this, the approach to the West occupied a central place in TPI’s identity-formulation and distinguished them from other “systemic” parties. Nevertheless, TPI’s stance on the West has not been static. Instead, the character of the relationship has acquired new shapes and dynamism, particularly in the late 1990s and 2000s. New circumstances have emerged, such as Political Islam’s lessons of the 1990s, in particular the February 28, 1997, coup that toppled the Refah Party (Welfare Party, WP) led-government. In this respect, the domestic context and considerations have exerted a significant impact on Turkish Political Islam’s attitude toward the West.

To better illustrate this evolution, it is necessary to divide the time-span from the WP to the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) into distinct periods: the Welfare Party’s brief rule (1996-97), and the first (2002-07), second (2007-11), and third (2011-present) periods of the AKP’s rule. These periods can also be described respectively as going from Political Islam’s rejection of the West to

1 The usage of the term “Political Islam” to denote parties of the pro-Islamic National Outlook Movement (NOM) tradition and the ruling AKP is a contested issue. A variety of other labels such as conservative, Political Muslimanism, and Muslim Democrats have been offered by many scholars in lieu of “Political Islam.” Moreover, once set against Political Islamist movements across the Arab World, Turkey’s “Political Islam” might appear more like a conventional conservative party than Political Islamist. Yet the choice of the term Political Islam in this piece is motivated by Turkey’s domestic political context rather than any theoretical considerations. Domestically, this term is widely used to describe the identity of the concerned parties.



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its enthusiastic embrace, and from co-existence to uncertainty.

Rejection of the West as Constitutive Other

The WP, along with other parties that came from the tradition of the Islamic National Outlook Movement (NOM), regarded the West as their ideological and constitutive other. The West therefore assumed a central place in their definition of their identities. For the WP, it was a means to set itself apart from all other “status quo” parties, given that Turkey’s Westward-orientation was a state policy and challenged by no mainstream party in earnest. In this respect, the WP could easily claim a special place with its anti-Western rhetoric, denouncing Europe as a Christian club, the international system as a Judeo-Christian artifact, and international institutions as tools of Western imperialism and capitalism.

True to its antisystemic posture, the WP attempted to lay the foundation for a parallel Islamic international system during its brief period in office by bringing together eight Muslim-majority countries to create D8, mirroring the G8. Moreover, the WP’s leader, Necmettin Erbakan, would speculate about creation of a common Islamic currency, the *dinar*, for a long time. This currency was meant to be used as a currency of exchange and reserve in the envisioned common Islamic market, mirroring a rudimentary form of the EU and its euro currency.

Moreover, the party regarded the West as a homogenous, monolithic entity composed of the United States, Europe, and Israel. In their criticism, they adopted the blanket term “the West” rather than make distinctions between its elements. Lastly, Erbakan’s critique of the West and Western-led institutions were not primarily related to Turkey’s under-representation in the system, unlike current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose criticism of the West does not focus on values but on the perceived under-representation of Turkey in the system. Instead, Erbakan’s critique was more value-driven. He regarded the current international system as being underpinned by Judeo-Christian values and therefore having no place for a Muslim power. The only way for Turkey to reclaim its proper place and status in the international arena, commensurate with its historical mission, was by way of spearheading the creation of a parallel Islamic international system and then leading it. This attitude only further

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aggravated the WP’s crisis of legitimacy domestically and internationally.

Yet during its brief period in power, the WP was unable to translate its criticisms of the West into governmental policies due to institutional constraints and the competing interests from within the coalition government. Nevertheless, the toppling of the WP-led government in 1997 elicited no serious criticisms either from the West or from within Turkey. The younger and reform-minded cadres of the NOM, which later founded the AKP, interpreted this as the result of the party’s anti-Western and antisystemic stance.

Genuine Embrace of the West as Legitimacy-Conferring Instrument

Distancing itself from the WP’s experience, the AKP² actively sought to commence membership talks with the EU, improve the relations with the United States, and to maintain cordial ties with Israel upon coming to power in 2002. It considered unbreakable the ties between the adoption of human rights and democracy-focused rhetoric, integration with the EU, and overcoming its crisis of security and legitimacy both internally and internationally. The military’s then continuing undue influence over politics was endangering the party’s survival. The EU process not only necessitated curtailing the military’s clout over politics, thereby effectively alleviating Turkey’s macro-democratic deficit, but also accorded legitimacy to the AKP. This could not have been solved merely through election victories, as the downfall of the WP had demonstrated. Thus, unlike the

² The AKP has been put under Political Islam’s umbrella because almost all the party’s founding members came from the NOM tradition and their breakaway from the NOM was largely not motivated by the tradition’s goals rather its political style.



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WP, the AKP regarded the West as an instrument to gain domestic and international legitimacy.

Moreover, in contrast to Erdoğan, Erdoğan refrained from using the blanket term “the West” in his criticisms, largely differentiating between Western countries instead. For instance, when Turkey’s relations with the United States suffered a considerable setback during the invasion of Iraq, Turkey-EU relations experienced a honeymoon period. Likewise, when Turkish-Israeli relations were deteriorating, Turkey strove to keep its relations with the United States intact. However, it needs to be recognized that the political context of the early 2000s and the securitization of Islamic politics played the primary role in the AKP’s overenthusiastic pro-Europeanness. Consequently, it was untenable in the long-run.

Co-Existence and Balancing

In its second term, the AKP attempted to balance its Western-focused foreign policy with alternative frameworks to achieve a more prominent international role. The reduced military threat, Turkey’s growing economy and the election of leaders opposing Turkey’s EU membership in Germany and France in 2005 and 2007, respectively, resulted in reduced enthusiasm for the AKP’s pro-Western (EU + the United States) stance. During this period, Turkey engaged in its surrounding regions more vigorously. This was also when Turkey carved out a unique position for itself as mediator and facilitator in some of the intractable, long-lasting issues and conflicts. This included mediating between Israel and Syria, Iran and the West, and different Palestinian factions, albeit largely to no avail.

The Era of Uncertainty

The AKP’s third term has been shaped by the Arab Spring and characterized by uncertainty in Turkey’s relations with

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the West. In the early stages of the Arab Spring, with the rise of Islamic Movements across the region and the gradual retreat of the United States, Turkey saw an opportunity to lead these revolutions and fill a perceived emerging power vacuum. The AKP saw their shared Islamic identity and lexicon as its vantage point in forming closer relations with the Arab World’s future political elites. Essentially, the AKP believed its identity (values) and interests were in sync in the post-Arab Spring countries. In contrast, a competition for influence, particularly with France and Britain, was seen as inevitable, as demonstrated by their conflicting positions on Libya. Such a reading of events created the incentive for Turkey to prioritize the Arab World, even at the expense of relations with the West. A three-year hiatus on opening new chapters for Turkey’s EU accession was partially a reflection of this understanding.

However, the Syrian imbroglio exposed Turkey’s limits and the gap between capacity and discourse, along with its reliance on the West in the security realm. Appreciation of ties to the West, especially to NATO, soon turned into stern criticisms of the West and of the international system once the much-anticipated intervention did not materialize. Bitter criticisms of the West reached their apex during the coup in Egypt and the Gezi Park Protests. The West’s stance on the Egyptian coup and on the Syrian Crisis have been seen by Turkey’s political elites as the manifestation of its anti-Islamic movement strategy in the region. The West’s overall approach to the Ukraine crisis further reinforced this sentiment. In addition, constant criticism of Turkey by media and official circles in the West is seen by the government through the same lenses. The more Turkey receives such rebukes, even if many of them are not misplaced, the more political elites resort to an anti-Western parlance. Putting aside the politically expedient nature of such denunciations aimed for domestic consumption, this cycle, if not reversed, can cause the West to once again be recast as Turkey’s conservative circle’s political “other.” To avoid this, due criticism should not give the impression of cast out Turkey.

Nevertheless, mindful of the value of Western ties, the government is partially attempting to recover its relations with the West. Opening a new accession chapter with the EU after three years, signing of readmission agreement and launching dialogue on visa liberalization with the EU, the AKP’s decision to open an office in Brussels, and



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the gradual mending of ties with Israel all point to such a desire. But the counter-examples abound as well. The AKP's decision to leave the European People's Party, citing the group's refusal to upgrade the AKP's observer status to full membership as the cause, to instead join the Euro-skeptic Alliance of European Conservative and Reformists is one such example.

In the AKP's third term, therefore, opposing trends have been set in motion simultaneously. As such, uncertainty currently rules Turkey's relations to the West. The future direction will be largely determined by the domestic and regional political context and the West's reaction to them. Thus, the evolution of Turkish Political Islam's understanding of and approach to the West continues.

About the Author

Galip Dalay works as a researcher in the political research department at the SETA Foundation in Turkey. He is also the book review editor of *Insight Turkey*. His opinion articles have appeared in *AJE Opinion*, *AJE Magazine*, *Huffington Post*, *World Politics Review*, *Fair Observers*, and in major Turkish dailies.

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