

Analysis

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Summary: Turkey's conservatism is primarily composed of two strands: center-right and Islamic conservatism. From 1946 until the birth of the pro-Islamic National Outlook Movement (NOM) in 1970, Turkey's conservatism was primarily represented by the center-right parties, known for their pro-European and pro-Western views, largely due to economic interests. From the advent of the NOM to the beginning of the Justice and Development Party (AKParty) rule in 2002, the center-right social base and the Islamists separated. While the center-right constituency by and large continued with their pro-European/Western posture, the Islamists opposed Turkey's European and Western orientation. With the AKParty's uninterrupted rule, the center-right social base and the Islamists largely merged within the fold of a single party, which led both groups to reshape each other's perception of Europe. Instead of categorical opposition or acquiescence, an events-based approach has become the hallmark of Turkish conservatives' attitude toward Europe.

Center Right, Conservatism, Islamism, and Turkey's European Vocation

by Galip Dalay

Introduction

Historically, Turkey's republican elites approached Europe and the West largely from an identity and civilizational perspective. The ultimate goal of the newly established modern Turkey in its march toward modernity, according to its founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was to catch up with contemporary civilizations, which meant constructing a modern, secular society along European/Western cultural, political and social norms. This was a normative approach intended to craft a new identity for the Turkish state and society.

Center-Right Understandings of Europe

In contrast, Turkey's conservatives during the Cold War, who were largely represented by center-right parties, did not look at the West and Europe through civilizational or identity lenses. Instead, their approach to Europe was more focused on economic interests. To some extent, the goal of weakening the then powerful military's influence in politics through harmonization of Turkey's democratic structure with that of the EU also played a role in the center-right parties' support

for integration with the EU, especially in the case of reform-minded former Prime Minister and President Turgut Özal.

As a consequence, center-right parties and leaders have been the most ardent supporters of Turkey's European vocation and Western orientation in general. From NATO membership to the formal application to become member of the European Union (EU), from signing the Customs Union treaty with the EU to the commencement of formal accession negotiations with the EU, almost all milestones on Turkey's road toward further integration with Europe and the West have been reached during center-right/conservative governments. The main motivations were the achievement of economic progress, modernization, an enhanced international status for Turkey, and getting rid of Turkey's military-led secular establishment's influence over internal politics.

Different Shades of Conservatism

Yet, the primacy of center-right parties among Turkey's conservatives was challenged by the ascendancy of the pro-Islamic National Outlook Move-

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ment (NOM) parties from the 1970s onward. They almost crumbled in the 1990s and early 2000s. Similar to Turkish secularists, NOM parties had an identity-driven understanding of Europe and the West. This pro-Islamic movement regarded the West as its identity's "constitutive other." In this regard, opposition to the West and "Western values" came to assume a central place in these parties' formulation of their identities. As a reflection of the Islamists' value-laden and identity-driven reading of the West, the EU was widely portrayed by NOM leaders as the "Christian Club," in which an aspiring Muslim power had no place.

Moreover the NOM parties utilized this stance toward the West to set themselves apart from all other parties domestically, since all the major mainstream parties then shared the goal of Turkey's EU membership. Hence, they contested the established status quo. They adopted an avowedly anti-Western posture, a posture that, however, has not always been translated into policies, as illustrated by the Welfare Party's (RP) short-lived experience in government between 1996 and 1997. The RP, nevertheless, was closed down by the Constitutional Court on the pretext that it became the focal point for anti-secular and Islamist activities in 1998. In its place, the Virtue Party (FP) was established. The FP served as a battle-ground between the NOM's young, reformist camp, which later went on to establish the Justice and Development Party (AKParty), and NOM's older generation about the future direction of their politics.

Learning lessons from the NOM parties' repeated closures by the Constitutional Court and taking into account systemic constraints, the younger generation advocated the re-evaluation of the movement's political course and the abandonment of its anti-systemic posture. Besides proposing overtures toward the non-Islamist section of society, they also advocated a novel approach toward the West in general and EU membership in particular in order to gain legitimacy internally and internationally, and to avoid the wrath of Turkey's then powerful and meddlesome military and civilian high bureaucracy — especially since their Islamist background attracted their ire and suspicion. As a result, the AKParty's first term (2002-07) in power was defined by a vigorous push toward EU membership.

Such a change of course gave credulity to the party's self-declared identity, which was Conservative Democratic rather than Islamist, and led it to be perceived more along

center-right political lines instead of Islamist ones. Furthermore, such a change seemed to be embraced by the voters as well. The AKParty received 34.3 percent of electoral support in November 3, 2002 election, a figure that was much higher than any NOM party's election results — the highest electoral support that a NOM Party ever achieved was around 21 percent in the 1995 general elections — and it also was a figure that allowed the AKParty to form a single party government. The AKParty's enviable electoral successes were repeated at each succeeding general elections with an even larger share of votes, around 46 percent in 2007 and 50 percent in the 2011 elections. Over the same time span, the traditional center-right parties of Turkey almost completely evaporated from the political scene. The AKParty subsumed the large chunk of traditional center-right voters, alongside Islamist ones, into its electorate. Thus it contains the seeds of both pro and anti-Western and European attitudes within its fold, and thereby, represents a special case.

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Top-Down Reading of AKParty Identity Versus a Bottom-Up Approach

In the light of the above analysis of the party's composition and motivations, it is possible to argue that the "Islamist" adjective that has often been affixed to the party's name signifies a top-down reading of the party's identity, primarily focusing on the political disposition of the party's founding cadres, a majority of whom came from the now-frail NOM. However, a bottom-up analysis of the party's identity has difficulty in describing the party as Islamist. As a catch-all dominant party, the AKP's voting base range is approximately between 45-50 percent of the population, a large share of which traditionally voted for the pragmatic, pro-Western and pro-market economy center-right parties. The remaining part of its base came from the NOM parties. These two groups' approaches to and understanding of the



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West and Europe were traditionally starkly different from each other.

However, the political socialization of the center-right and Islamic constituencies under the AKParty umbrella over the years has culminated in both groups' mutual reshaping of each other's political disposition, and hence gaining a new perception of Europe and the European Union. This interaction has weakened some of the more radical and identity-driven political demands of the Islamists and their anti-European (or anti-EU) posture. On the other hand, this socialization has led previously center-right voters to embrace a more religiously flavored conservative political identity, hence adopting a more critical stance toward the EU. Besides the socialization at the grassroots level, this process has also been considerably facilitated by then prime minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership and his religiously tinged and value-laden political language.

With this socialization in the background, since around 2007, there has been an increasingly lukewarm, if not negative, reception of Europe by Turkey's wider conservative segment. A combination of external and internal factors played their roles in this transformation. The change of governments in Germany and France brought Christian Democrats and center-right parties, respectively, into power in late 2005 and 2007. They outright opposed Turkey's membership in the EU based on cultural and religious factors. This caused a backlash of a similar kind among Turkey's conservatives. They once again tended to view Europe primarily through identity lenses. Second, the more the AKParty felt secure vis-à-vis the civil-military secularist establishment, the less value the EU process had for them as a tool for conferring legitimacy and systemic security. As the government had won the battle that started with the civilian and military old guard by 2010, its need for the EU membership process to provide them with systemic security, internal, and international legitimacy has almost disappeared.

Arab Awakening: Tilting the Balance in Favor of Islamism

This period also coincided with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, a process that had an immense impact on the AKParty's foreign policy calculations. The initial euphoria of revolutions across the Arab World helped shades of

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Islamism within the wider conservative movement became more discernible and visible. Conservatives/Islamists believed in the inevitability of Islamists coming to power across the region once democratic procedures were in place. The urgency of the momentous events unfolding region-wide and the increased confidence in the future of Political Islam coupled with the prevalence of culturalist arguments against Turkey's full membership in the EU further moved Turkey's attention and orientation away from Europe toward the Middle East and North Africa.

Rising Interest in the EU Membership Again?

Yet this initial optimism among conservatives was soon replaced by increased anxiety as the tide of events across the Arab World has partially been reversed. The turn of events has affected Turkey's assessment of its politics eastward and westward as well. It seems that Turkey's current level of engagement with and interest in Middle Eastern affairs is set to continue without any loss of steam. However, with the course of the Arab revolutions being reversed, most staggeringly with the coup in Egypt and the deepened Syrian imbroglio, Turkey has begun to again appreciate its Western and European ties in order to rebalance its foreign policy, which was seen in recent years being disproportionately leaning toward the Middle East and leverage these ties for more influence in the Middle East.



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On the societal level, as the German Marshall Fund of the United States' *Transatlantic Trends 2014* survey demonstrated, support for EU membership in Turkey rose by almost 10 percentage points when compared with the previous year's figure. Moreover, in comparison with Turkey's other major foreign policy involvements, EU membership is the least contentious one and probably has the highest rate of support among the population, a figure that cuts across political boundaries. There is a growing appreciation among the conservative business community and wider elites that Turkey's goal of moving from being a developing country to become a developed one by 2023 — the centenary of the foundation of Turkish Republic — will be unattainable without the EU anchor. To put it differently, an increase in interest-driven support for Turkey's EU process is discernible among the conservative elites.

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