The Postsecular Republic

Turkey's Experiments with Islamism

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I have no religion, and at times I wish all religions at the bottom of the sea. He is a weak ruler who needs religion to uphold his government; it is as if he would catch his people in a trap.
—Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

I do not subscribe to the view that Islamic culture and democracy cannot be reconciled.
—Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

What has happened in Turkey during the last couple of decades resembles a real-life laboratory test involving chemistry between a zealous secular legacy inscribed into the republic since the formal proclamation of its birth in October 1923 and a neo-Islamism that challenges the status quo. Although the political-ideological pendulum has yet to swing fully in either extreme direction, it undulates with the volatility and uncertainty of an earthquake and its aftershocks.

The recent political turmoil, protests, and demonstrations—together with a host of scandals plaguing the government and at times affecting the police, judiciary, and military—are seemingly unrelated to the issue of mixing religion and politics. However, in reality, the struggle for the survival and preservation of Turkish secularism is the pervasive, underlying constitutional prescription that always reverberates overtly as well as subtly in Turkish politics. The rise and empowerment of the Justice and Development Party (AK Parti or AKP) threw a wrench into that reality.

An "Islamist" party, the AKP strives to fit into the descriptions of "Turkish democracy," "conservative democracy," "Muslim democracy," or "democratic Islamism." It has proven resilient while countless other recent experiments in Islamism in the region have failed miserably. The AKP has enjoyed significant shares of parliamentary seats and constitutes the largest political party in the country. During the August 2014 elections, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became president, polling 52 percent of the votes.[1] Now

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that the AKP has demonstrated its survivability, can we speak of a "postsecular republic" in Turkey? Are Turkey's ambitions for an Ottoman revival in the Middle East linked to the AKP/Erdoğan-led Islamism? What does this mean for the regional actors, and how have they reacted to Turkey? What are the implications of these factors for US-Turkey relations and those between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Turkey? These are some of the questions addressed by this analysis.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This analysis is a result of the author's research trips to Turkey in March 2011 and December 2013 during which she interviewed a number of Turkish civilians and military personnel and one US Embassy official, all of whom wish to remain anonymous. The author also spent a month in Turkey in August 1993, and observations from the time spent there are considered in the analysis. She includes her own professional, analytical observations in this study, as well as content analyses of various statistical and qualitative data.

Furthermore, this article analyzes the theories and concepts pertaining to Islamism (or political Islam) and secularism; indeed, this study focuses on how they apply to the case of the Republic of Turkey. The conclusion encapsulates the broader implications of the push and pull between Islamism and secularism in the republic during the twenty-first century.

Kemalism: The Roots of the Secular Republic

> *I will lead my people by the hand along the road until their feet are sure and they know the way. Then they may choose for themselves and rule themselves. Then my work will be done.*
>
> —Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Upon the demise of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey underwent a crucial transition, completely reassessing its national ideology and sociocultural identity in the newly defined parameters of the Republic of Turkey (*Turkiye Cumhuriyeti*). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) spearheaded Turkey's social, political, and economic transformation, forming a movement and ideology that created the groundbreaking undercurrents of secular nationalism in the region. As "a practitioner of nation building," Atatürk envisioned a society based on "solidarism"—that is, "the building of an integrated, conflict-free society."[2] In this context, former subjects of the Ottoman Empire became citizens of the Turkish republic, and religion—having no state involvement or affiliation—was rendered a strictly personal matter of individuals. Politics and government turned wholly secular, as did all of the state-run institutions and sectors, including education.

Albert Hourani best describes the legacy of Atatürkism (or Kemalism), observing that under Atatürk, Turkey made concerted efforts towards departing from its past, and

> from the Arab countries with which its past had been so closely connected: that of re-creating society on the basis of national solidarity, a rigid separation of state and religion, and a deliberate attempt to turn away from the Middle Eastern world and become part of Europe. The ancient tie between Turks and Arabs was dissolved, in circumstances which left some bitterness on both sides, exacerbated for a time by disputes about frontiers with Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, the example of Atatürk, who had defied Europe with success and set his nation on a new path, was to have a profound effect upon national movements throughout the Arab world.[3]

Regarding the new republic's vision for secularism specifically, Andrew Finkel writes that

> Turkish secularism . . . is *the state*'s *right to assert its primacy over religion*. The [Turkish] government still funds a huge religious establishment, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIB), which licenses after-school Koranic courses, administers Turkey's allotted pilgrimage quota for the Hadj, publishes books, and makes moral pronouncements. While it does not build and maintain mosques, it does provide stipends for the nation's clerics, who, in turn, are expected to preach a prepared message from the Friday pulpit.[4] (emphasis added)

Turkey's citizenry remains divided about the concept and practice of secularism despite the deeply engrained and forced secularization of Turkish society and politics. Interpretations of Atatürk's secularism vary, even today.

Understanding the Concepts of Secularism and Islamism

Upon coming to power, the AKP successfully cut off the legs of the powerful military, which serves as the ultimate protector of Turkish secularism. That very moment when the Turkish military leadership found itself in peril, ensnared in a coup-plot scandal and severely weakened, may signify the birth of the "postsecular" Republic of Turkey. It was then that the AKP, a political party with an Islamist platform, did the unthinkable: first, it disempowered the powerful protectors of Kemalism and then it cautiously and gradually loosened some of the reins that traditionally restricted religious practices in the public sphere, such as wearing a *hijab* (head scarf) in public-sector employment.

The importance of understanding the concepts of secularism and Islamism cannot be overemphasized; however, even their definitions are cause for contention. A standard English dictionary defines *secularism* as "the belief that religion should not play a role in government, education, or other public parts of society." Defining Islamism is far more complicated. The backdrop to answering the question "What is political Islam or Islamism?" is the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which directly relates to the current dilemma of the Turkish republic. According to Prof. Muqtedar Khan, "The key moment when the decline of Muslim power was crystallized in the Muslim psyche was when the Ottoman Empire disappeared and the Islamic Caliphate as an institution was abolished in 1924. Many Islamic movements have since emerged with the explicit goal to revive the Muslim *Ummah*, reform Muslim societies and restore them to their past glory." Professor Khan goes on to explain that the general belief among many Muslims (globally) is that

the Islamic imperial decline is due to abandoning the path to and practice of "true *Sharia*" and that reimplementing this "true *Sharia*" will, supposedly, lead to the reemergence of Islamic "glory."[5] In the view of some Muslims, the mechanisms for this reemergence involve the politicization of Islam:

> Clearly there are many groups that are seeking to establish some kind of Islamic polity, which then can become an instrument for global Islamic resurgence and even political unification. Islamic polities, states or caliphates are not the endgame. They are to become means and instruments of global Islamic resurgence. Political Islamic movements can also be divided according to the means that they wish to employ in order to realize their first goal—the Islamic polity. I submit that there are two types, those who seek the Islamic polity through force and violence, even terrorism, and those who seek it through peaceful means including democratic processes. Those who use force are now widely referred to as *Jihadis*, and those who don't use force are identified by academia and media as *Islamists*.[6]

Despite Atatürk's legacy and deeply entrenched and enforced secularization of the Turkish republic, elements of Islamism—or Islamist ambitions—have persisted since the post-Ottoman era. Stephen Dale describes this seemingly paradoxical reality in Turkey:

> Yet in spite of the juggernaut of Kemalist secularism, not only did Islam survive but some Turkish Muslims dedicated themselves to its revitalization. One of the most influential of those who sought to revivify Turkish Islam was Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a precocious Muslim autodidact from Turkish Kurdistan. Nursi established an organization known as the *Risale-I Nur* (The Prophecy of Light), dedicated to renewing Islamic piety and individual spiritual perfection at the grassroots level, avoiding religious political activism in an era of state secularism.
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> Nursi's program had a certain general resemblance to the Deoband Madrasa in late nineteenth-century India, to the extent that both movements operated within secular environments, emphasized individual spiritual revival, and abstained from political activism. In the early twenty-first century the democratic election of a religious political party demonstrates that in Turkey, as well as in Pakistan, the question of the relationship between religion and the state is still unresolved, and in fact may never be definitively settled, even to the limited degree it has been in the world's two largest secular democracies, India and the United States.[7]

Turkish secularists—especially the protectors of Turkish secularism in the military—viewed Said Nursi as an "anti-Kemalist" threat. Nursi's popularity grew throughout Turkey, and he became increasingly revered as an Islamic scholar and mullah. In fact, many people cite Nursi as the "most influential theologian of the Turkish Republic."[8]

The Turkish military became so alarmed at Nursi's magnetism, even after his death as mourners in the thousands paid homage to his shrine in Urfa, that on 12 July 1960, "soldiers forced their way into the shrine, smashed open a marble tomb with sledgehammers and removed a shrouded body. The body was lifted onto an army truck, driven along heavily guarded streets to an airfield outside town, loaded onto a military plane and never seen again."[9] It is believed that the military reburied him in a secret grave. This military

maneuver marked the first coup d'état in the republic's modern history, exemplifying the military rulers' fears that "Nursi would become a symbol of dissent, his grave a shrine to anti-Kemalism."[10] Demolishing Nursi's shrine proved ineffective. Even today, Nursi is revered and respected, and recently the Turkish parliament set up a special commission for investigating military coups in Turkey and for revealing the location of Nursi's secret tomb.[11] His following is alive and vibrant, and with the military subjugated at the hands of the AKP and Erdoğan, his followers are emboldened.

Those followers still visit the empty tomb in Urfa and his house in Isparta; they "even [flock] to the Urfa hotel room he died in, piously preserved in its original state by the hotel owner right down to the light bulb."[12] Nursi followers are called "Nurcu" or "followers of the light," and some people estimate their numbers in the millions. This fact is important because the threads of the religious fabric of Turkish public, political, and religious leaders increasingly strengthen. Consider what Mustafa Akyol, an expert on Turkish Islam, says about the Nurcu: "About half the Islamic movement in Turkey, meaning the pious, conservative segment of society, are literally direct followers of Nursi, while the other half also respects him."[13] Additionally,

> the Nurcu community includes the sizable Gulen movement, named after the currently U.S.-based preacher Fethullah Gulen, as well as several other movements and a separate Kurdish following, all of them distinct, but united in their allegiance to Mr. Nursi's teachings.
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> Modernity, science and rationalism play key roles in his teachings, as does the individual, distinguishing the Nurcu movement from other currents of Islam.[14]

While the concept of "Islamic democracy" is endlessly debated since the puzzle of the compatibility between Islam and (liberal) democracy has never been completely solved, Islam in Turkey has not only survived over the decades but also thrived. The Fethullah Gülen movement offers yet another snapshot of the power and influence of "Islamism" although this is a more subtle, grassroots-based brand of Turkish Islam. The movement's power is growing, some say to the extent of establishing "a state within a state" although Turkish people, analysts, pundits, and scholars repeatedly point out that such growth is extremely hard to prove. The certainty lies in the fact that it is a lucrative and popular global movement, with Gülenist schools proliferating in numerous countries, and it has an eccentric, elderly spiritual leader at its helm.

Fethullah Gülen: The "'State within the State' Run by Someone Outside the State"

> *Criticizing and objecting to everything means an attempt to destruction. If you do not like something, try to make something better than it. Being destructive causes ruins, while being constructive brings about prosperity.*
>
> —Fethullah Gülen

An article by Rachel Sharon-Krespin in the *Middle East Quarterly* describes the Gülen movement as "a shadowy Islamist sect led by the mysterious *hocaefendi* (master lord) Fethullah Gülen; the sect often bills itself as a proponent of tolerance and dialogue but works toward purposes quite the opposite. Today, Gülen and his backers (*Fethullahcilar*, Fethullahists) not only seek to influence government but also to become the government."[15] Gülen currently lives in voluntary exile in eastern Pennsylvania, from where he has launched a multi-billion-dollar transnational empire.[16]

The Gülen movement in Turkey controls vast media empires, businesses, banks, "an international network of thousands of schools, universities, student residences, . . . and many associations and foundations."[17] Gülen membership covers a wide spectrum in Turkey, including members of the AKP, the police, the community at large, and allegedly even the military. Gülen was a disciple of Sheikh Said-I Nursi (1878–1960), who founded the Nur movement. Following independence, Nursi demanded that "the new republic be based on Islamic principles. He turned against Ataturk and his reforms and against the new modern, secular, Western republic."[18]

The recent rift between Erdoğan and Gülen is also highly public; further, it is not only ideological but also personal. This entire episode is intertwined with political intrigue, scandals, and some of Erdoğan's own domestic policies that have angered countless Turkish citizens. To repel the criticism, Erdoğan and his constituents have concocted and perpetuated Hollywood-worthy conspiracy theories, as the passages below describe:

> At the heart of the conspiracy, it is claimed, is a "parallel state" led by Fethullah Gulen, a reclusive cleric who sought refuge in the United States in 1999 when he was persecuted by the then-dominant Turkish military establishment. Gulen and Erdogan had earlier formed an alliance against this common enemy. But now, with the military forced back into its barracks, they have turned on each other. For Erdogan and his supporters this vast conspiracy, instigated by Gulen and his presumed followers in the judiciary and the police force, is aided and abetted by a slew of villains. These include, Americans, Jews, Israel, Germans, neocons, CNN, *Financial Times*, a variety of international and domestic banks, the Council on Foreign Relations. Even the Queen of England, if you can believe it, has nothing better to do with her time than plot the downfall of the Turkish Prime Minister and his supporters. Why, exactly, would all these people have it in for Erdogan? It's a mystery, of course.[19]

For his part, Gülen has denied allegations of meddling in Turkish politics and stirring up scandals, problems, and crises for Erdoğan and the AKP. Normally quiet and reclusive, Gülen actually has publicly sounded alarm bells about the future of Turkey under Erdoğan. In March 2014, he penned an op-ed in the *Financial Times*, calling for

> a new constitution to rein in rights [Gülen] says are under siege.
>
> In some of his most explicit comments since the December eruption of the feud between the Turkish prime minister and his own movement, Mr. Gülen wrote in the *Financial Times* that "a small group within the government's executive branch is holding to ransom the entire country's progress."

> He highlights recent laws passed by Mr. Erdogan's Islamist-rooted AK party that increase government controls over judicial appointments and internet access, while warning that a pending legislative proposal by the party "would give Turkey's intelligence agency powers akin to those claimed by dictatorial regimes." . . .
>
> Mr. Gülen said in his article that his movement has "no interest in the privileges of power" and notes what he called his followers' "purposeful absence from political office." Despite calls from Mr. Erdogan for the preacher to return to Turkey from the US, Mr. Gulen adds that he would remain in "spiritual retreat" and would refrain from endorsing any political party.[20]

Erdoğan retorted that the Gülen movement is not a religious one at all but "a completely political organization that does everything, including espionage," he alleges.[21] Moreover, "Mr. Erdogan recently revealed he was discussing the closure of Gulenist schools—which are present in about 140 countries around the world—with the government of Pakistan, and suggested other jurisdictions could also move against the schools."[22]

Northeastern University sociology professor Berna Turam has deconstructed the Gülen-Erdoğan relationship, contending that

> these two pious Muslim groups have not cooperated with each other with the exception of a five-year period during the first term of the AKP (2002–2007). Historically, they come from two different branches of Islam in Turkey. The leader, Fethullah Gulen, and his followers have never approved of—or stood close to—Necmettin Erbakan's more radical Islamism, embodied by *Milli Gorus* (National Outlook).
>
> Although the GM [Gülen Movement] at large shifted their votes from centre-right parties to the AKP in the 2002 election, Gulen never truly trusted Erbakan's tradition and his protege Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has served as the prime minister since 2002.

Professor Turam describes the two Muslim groups as being locked in a vicious power struggle, especially since the summer of 2013.[23]

The conspiracy mill churns out speculation about the extent to which the Gülen movement has penetrated the Turkish police, security forces, and even the armed forces. Everyone to whom the author asked this question during her field research in Istanbul described it as the Gülen-led "state within a state" in Turkey, but no one could say for sure. Many went out of their way to say that "no one can prove it."

Secularism versus Islamism in the Modern Era: The Dilemma of Turkish Muslims

Turkey has a population of about 81.6 million; the main ethnic groups in Turkey include 70–75 percent Turkish, 18 percent Kurdish, and 7–12 percent other minorities. Turkey is 99.8 percent Muslim (majority Sunni), and minority communities of mainly Christians and Jews account for about 0.2 percent. Turkey's total literacy rate is 94.1 percent—97.9 percent among males and 90.3 percent among females.[24]

Ceren, a madrassa teacher in Istanbul, originally from the more conservative and religious city of Konya, wears hijab in modern-day Turkey.[25] Describing herself as a Sufi (practitioner of Islamic mysticism), she says that she could not wear hijab and work two years ago, but now the laws are more relaxed: "Some interpreted Atatürk's secularism as hating religion, but he didn't hate religion; he hated religion mixing with politics."[26]

A professor at Istanbul University remarks that "since Atatürk's secularism, some interpret secularism as hating religion. Some people actually hate religion. Some in the religious establishment hate the idea of mixing religion and politics. Turks love freedom."[27]

Parts of Istanbul are ardently pro-AKP and pro-Erdoğan, but other parts are fiercely anti-AKP/anti-Erdoğan. The Eyup Sultan suburb of Istanbul is visibly more conservative and religious, with many more women wearing head scarves and large congregations praying at the Eyup Sultan Mosque. The surrounding streets are lined with small shops selling religious merchandise (e.g., rosaries, headdresses, prayer rugs, Qurans, and other religious literature); the upbeat Taksim area, however, features trendy shops and cafés lining the famous Istiqlal Street, the site of recent violent protests and clashes between young activists and the police. Young college-age men and women wear Western clothes and sip coffee; occasionally, young couples even steal kisses. This is Turkey today—a collage of liberal and conservative, secular and religious, pro- and anti-AKP/Erdoğan people.

More pious Muslims seem to like the AKP and Erdoğan. Such is the case within Turkey. See figure 1 for the results a mid-2013 Pew poll that shows Erdoğan's popularity in Turkey.

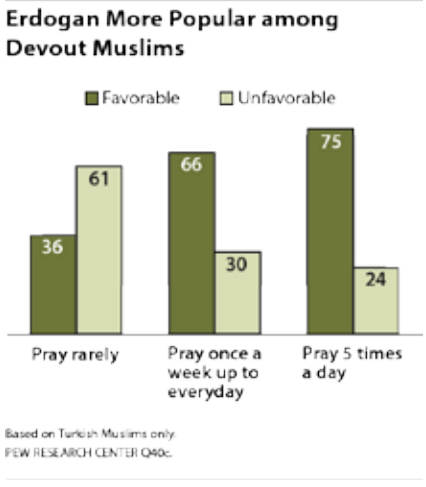

Figure 1. Erdogan more popular among devout Muslims (percent). (Jacob Poushter, "Prime Minister Erdogan Popular in Turkey Broadly, but Less So in Istanbul," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, 5 June 2013, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/05/prime-minister-erdogan-popular-in-turkey-but-less-so-in-istanbul/. Reprinted with permission of the Pew Research Center.)

These perspectives clearly illustrate a diversity of opinions, identities, affinities, and approaches to defining the concepts of secularism and Islamism. This diversity also illustrates a general lack of consensus among Muslims, particularly in Turkey, about the

extent to which Islam should be involved, if at all, in politics and in the public sphere. Although this situation is not exclusive to Turkey, it nonetheless renders a unique problem in terms of defining or redefining the national identity of the Turkish republic in the twenty-first century. If we examine the constitution of Turkey, we see emphasis not only on the principles that Atatürk established at the founding of the republic but also on secularism:

> The recognition that no protection shall be accorded to an activity contrary to Turkish national interests, the principle of the indivisibility of the existence of Turkey with its state and territory, Turkish historical and moral values or the nationalism, principles, reforms and modernism of Atatürk and that, as required by the *principle of secularism*, there shall be no interference whatsoever by sacred religious feelings in state affairs and politics; the acknowledgment that it is the birthright of every Turkish citizen to lead an honorable life and to develop his or her material and spiritual assets under the aegis of national culture, civilization and the rule of law, through the exercise of the fundamental rights and freedoms set forth in this Constitution in conformity with the requirements of equality and social justice.[28] (emphasis added)

What has kept the AKP and Erdoğan popular among significant segments of society? Part of the answer lies in the desire and ambitions of some individuals—perhaps many—to see Turkey rise again, as in its glorious past, as a prominent regional and perhaps even global power. These desires and ambitions marry Turkish nationalism with numerous other factors and present-day political, economic, security, and ideological realities in the country and the region. Among them are the nearly constant rejection by the European Union (EU) of Turkey's propositions for membership; the 2011 Arab Awakening uprisings and revolutions (related to this, of course, is the vicious civil war in neighboring Syria); Turkish-Iranian relations and Iran's nuclear program; Turkish-Israeli relations, which have been rocky for the last few years; Turkey's NATO membership and relations with the United States; and Turkey's strong economy, especially during the 2008 financial crisis. In light of these realities, Erdoğan's popularity skyrocketed throughout the Middle East but then plummeted after the 2013 coup in Egypt. What are the prospects for an "Ottoman resurgence"?

Turkey in the Post–Cold War Era: Ottoman Resurgence?

Turkey's longtime membership in NATO, its aspirations for EU membership, and its unique geopolitical importance and geographically strategic location as the gateway between Europe and Asia all account for the nation's significance throughout the Cold War—and now in the post–Cold War era. Specifically, in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq (2003), the United States' influence and reputation in the Middle East have been in decline, especially during the George W. Bush administration. Even under the Obama administration, public opinion in the region is proving very critical and suspicious of US intentions. Turkey has acted on opportunities to step in and attempt to fill that regional influence gap. To some extent, President Erdoğan has been very successful.

The chain of events leading to a significant increase in his popularity is articulated below. First, though, a closer look at Turkey's political and socioeconomic indicators is necessary.

Turkey's growth in gross domestic product for 2013 was 3.8 percent; the 2010 statistic has 16.9 percent of the population reportedly below the poverty line.[29] The Turkish government has boasted vocally about how its economy is stronger than many others in Western Europe, and Turkey did not have to bail out its banks. Turkey initiated painful economic and financial reforms in 2001, but the economy has proven resilient and thriving in the 2008 recession and afterward, especially compared to the many Western economies that have suffered financial meltdowns.

Turkey's export partners include France, Germany, Iraq, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Turkey exports textiles, apparel, foodstuffs, manufactures, and transport equipment.[30] Its import partners include Russia, Germany, the United States, China, France, Italy, and—despite economic sanctions—Iran, from which Turkey receives substantial petroleum, keeping Iran's oil industry alive and functioning. Turkey's main import commodities include chemicals, fuels, machinery, goods (unfinished), and transport equipment.[31]

The nation's principal domestic/regional security concern is the status of Kurds in northern Iraq, from which many Kurdish militant operatives—especially the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—carry out attacks in southeastern Turkey and retreat to safe havens in northern Iraq. Since 2011 the Syrian civil war has triggered a huge influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey, the number of which the United Nations estimates has reached nearly 635,000 as of March 2014, and tensions remain high between Ankara and Damascus.[32] Furthermore, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) has further complicated Turkey's situation, politically and otherwise, since the terrorists operate on the Syrian-Turkish border. The ISIS threat has inadvertently led Turkey—albeit through tremendous pressures from the United States and regional actors—to allow support and weapons to flow into the hands of Kurdish fighters inside Syria. Clearly, Turkey's main worry is empowerment of the PKK, a terrorist organization that has conducted a violent insurgency inside Turkey for many years.

The 2011 Arab Awakening was a pivotal reverberation of uprisings and revolutions in the region, of which the Syrian civil war is a by-product. Further, the counterrevolution in Egypt that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood and installed Gen Abdel Fattah al-Sisi served as a huge setback for the pro-democracy movement. At the height of the 2011 Arab Awakening, the phrase *Turkish model* circulated especially in Egypt when the role and impact of the Muslim Brotherhood in the revolution that ousted the Hosni Mubarak regime came into question. With Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, we see evidence that it embraced the AKP as a viable model of a democratic Islamic political system. "AKP-style democracy is exactly what the [pro-democracy] movement has long been pursuing," said Ashraf Abdel Ghaffar, a Turkey-based leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. "Everyone in the region respects AKP policies," he said.[33]

Later, however, Turkey and Qatar faced political retaliation from Arab regimes for the former's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt:

> Trying to become a nonpermanent member of the Security Council, Turkey lost out to Spain and New Zealand in a contest for two available seats reserved for a voting bloc called the Western European and Others Group, which includes the United States.
>
> . . . According to several diplomatic sources, there was an intense campaign, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, against Turkey's membership in the council. The two countries are angered by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which both are fighting at home.[34]

The argument for the Turkish model was based on the logic that if Turkey, a die-hard secular political system, can sustain an Islamic party (the AKP) and at the same time it can preserve its pro-West policies as well as NATO membership and participation, then so can anyone else in the region. Emre Caliskan wrote an opinion piece on exactly this topic in the 5–6 March 2011 edition of the *Hurriyet Daily*, in which he pointed out that a recent poll "held in seven Arab nations and Iran, published by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, or TESEV, shows 66 percent of more than 2,200 respondents believing that Turkey is a 'successful blend of Islam and democracy.'"[35] He added that

> after the Turkish Constitutional Court banned the Islamist Welfare Party in January 1998, and its successor, the Virtue Party, in 2001, because of their Islamic agendas, the traditional Islamic "National View" movement had to review its ideas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Young Islamist leaders, including current Turkish [president] Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, cleared their political agenda of radical Islamist elements and established the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, as a new force capable of combining traditional Islamic values with Western-style democratic policies.[36]

Until the military coup in Egypt in June 2013, which unseated the Muslim Brotherhood from power, Turkey's attempts to emerge as a dominant regional power in the Middle East were proving relatively successful. President Erdoğan is credited with a series of incidents and policies that have heightened his and Turkey's respect and popularity in the region. In addition to successes in establishing and maintaining the AKP in power, the AKP's leadership has reached out to other Muslim countries in the region, and relations between them have "warmed considerably."[37] In fact, "many argue that Turkey has set the ambitious goal of becoming the leader of the Muslim world, with its foreign policies frequently referred to as neo-Ottomanism."[38]

Upon coming to power, the AKP tackled pragmatic issues such as the economy. In its second term, the "AKP addressed head scarves," according to a reliable source in Ankara. The same source added that President Erdoğan "maintains ties to the West and at the same time increases ties to the East, including China."[39]

The chain of events regarding Erdoğan and Turkey's actions, particularly involving Israel, that have led to their increased popularity among the Arab and Muslim populations in the region includes the following: (1) Israel initiated Operation Cast Lead (i.e., the "Gaza War") in December 2008 while Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert was visiting Turkey, an action that insulted the Turks; (2) Israel carried out Operation Orchard, destroying a supposed nuclear facility in the Syrian Desert in September 2007, and in the

process Israel allegedly violated Turkish airspace, angering Turkey; (3) when Prime Minister Erdoğan stood up to Israel's president Shimon Peres during the Davos Summit in January 2009 and when he walked off the stage after a heated exchange with Peres over the Gaza offensive, Erdoğan's popularity shot up in the Arab Middle East; and (4) Turkey became enraged with Israel's May 2010 raid of the "Gaza Flotilla" (humanitarian-aid ships bound for Gaza) that killed eight Turks and one Turkish-American. Turkey demanded a public apology from Israel for this incident, the "Mavi Marmara," but Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused to apologize.[40] In March 2013, though, "Netanyahu placed a call to his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan while closeted with Obama in a trailer on the tarmac at Ben Gurion airport in the last minutes before the president's departure for Jordan. Obama joined the call at one point. The Israeli prime minister's office said Netanyahu 'apologised to the Turkish people for any errors that could have led to the loss of life.' Erdogan accepted the apology."[41]

Turkish-Israeli relations are still injured, but not completely obsolete. Turkey and Israel have continued limited military-to-military relations, primarily in the form of defense-industry contracts, but since the breakdown in political relations and the Gaza flotilla incident, joint military exercises—formerly routine between the two—are no longer taking place to date.[42]

Apparently, Turkey has adopted the Palestinian issue and assumed the mantle for supporting the Palestinian cause. In a public lecture at the Harvard University Kennedy School in October 2010, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkish minister of foreign affairs at the time, emphasized that "the Palestinian question is affecting everything in the world. There must be a solution. If the peace is achieved then one Israeli can go from Tel Aviv to Damascus to Turkey and Europe and similarly a Syrian can go to Jerusalem and pray. Our vision is to achieve this peace." He also emphasized a global need for the spirit of cooperation and inclusiveness in "the world political arena."[43]

It is very likely that Turkey will continue to remain quite active in regional politics, including in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the AKP will promote itself as a source of inspiration for compatibility between Islam and democracy. Whether or not other regional Islamic political entities will simulate the AKP remains to be seen. The 2013 coup in Egypt was a significant setback for promoting the "AKP model." As one Turkish military officer remarked, "Turkey wants to assert itself, especially to show Muslim solidarity—such as with the plight of the Rohingyas in Burma—but [Turkey] has no power to back it up."[44]

In addition, since the rise of ISIS and its declaration of a "new Caliphate" or Islamic State (*al-Dawla al-Islamiyya*), the ambitions of many regional actors—both state and nonstate—to emerge as the dominant power and/or establish a new "empire" in the modern era have become extremely problematic. If Turkey, for example, seeks to revive a second version of the Ottoman Empire, then ISIS has definitely intensified the competition and set up many roadblocks. Furthermore, the complexities of the Sunni-Shia rivalry and conflicts occurring in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and spreading elsewhere, are creating security and political dilemmas for Turkey. Given that Turkey continues to purchase oil

from Iran, the increasingly violent sectarian fault lines in the region might come back to haunt this Turkish-Iranian relationship. Consider that "the largest buyers of Iranian crude and condensate are China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey. . . . In 2012 . . . roughly 90% of Iran's [natural gas] exports went to Turkey."[45] Figure 2 paints a complicated picture of Turkey's regional dilemmas and relationships.

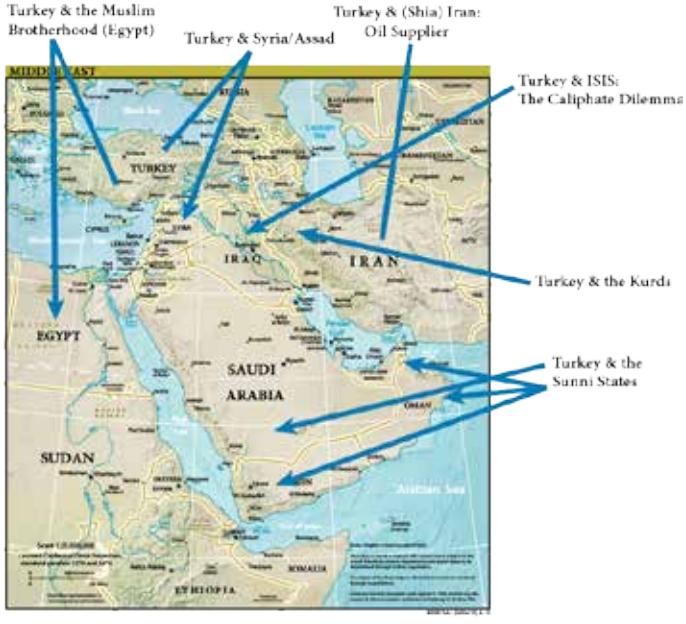

Figure 2. Turkey and the Middle East. (Reprinted from University of Texas Libraries, University of Texas at Austin, accessed 9 April 2015, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/middle_east_ref_2012.pdf. Used by permission of the University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.)

All of these developments have further complicated the situation involving the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, which constitutes a sensitive security concern for Turkey and her borders. The October 2014 ISIS siege of Kobani, Syria, on the Turkish border actually triggered violent protests within Turkey by Kurds demanding that the Turkish government allow Kurdish fighters and supplies to flow through the border. By late October, the death toll of protesters reached nearly 40. As a result of this domestic crisis related to a regional one, Turkey eventually decided to allow some Kurdish fighters through the border crossing. Clearly, this decision proved difficult for President Erdoğan, but international (especially Western) pressures—combined with internal pro-Kurdish protests—compelled Turkey to open the border. Meanwhile, the Erdoğan government insists that Western powers focus on removing Syrian president Bashar al-Assad from power rather than targeting ISIS and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. This message has resonated with the Free Syrian Army and anti-Assad activists, who, like Erdoğan, criticize the US-led air strikes against ISIS as inadvertently assisting Assad.

In general, Erdoğan's popularity is dropping in the Middle East, especially compared to his position reflected in 2013 statistics. Figure 3 illustrates the favorability rat-

ings by country of Erdoğan according to a Pew poll, showing a steady drop from 2013—except for Israel, oddly enough, which shows a very slight increase.

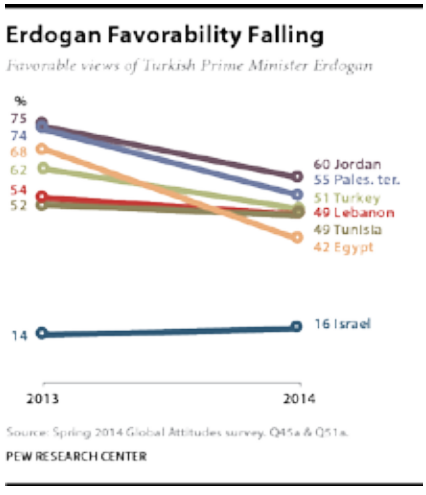

Figure 3. Erdogan favorability falling. (Jacob Poushter, "Support for Turkey's Erdogan Drops Sharply in Middle East," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, 30 July 2014, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/30/support-for-turkeys-erdogan-drops-sharply-in-middle-east/. Reprinted with permission of the Pew Research Center.)

Internationally, Turkey's decision to join NATO has been the country's most strategic in modern history and its saving grace over the years although it has not served as a ticket to EU membership. The Obama administration has continued to voice its support for Turkey's EU membership but without success. Turkey's neo-Ottoman aspirations have major implications for its NATO membership as well as its prospects for EU entrance.

This author asked the following question of Dr. Tom Fedyszyn, professor of national security affairs at the US Naval War College and the academic lead for the NATO Defense Education Enhancement Program in Azerbaijan: "How does NATO see Turkey today in terms of its geopolitical and strategic value as a NATO member?" Expressing his personal views, Dr. Fedyszyn responded that

> the relationship between Turkey and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization . . . has evolved considerably since Turkey's entry in 1952. Then, its size, shared interest, and location made Turkey the bulwark of NATO's policy of Soviet containment and collective defense. The common threat from Moscow enabled Ankara to align closely with security policy developed in both Brussels and Washington. Subsequent to the fall of the Berlin Wall, Turkey continued to play a major role in the alliance's policy of collective security and crisis management. Notable among its contributions is the vast allied military infrastructure located on Turkish soil.
>
> Turkey has recently been evolving toward a more independent foreign policy marked by increased interest in regional affairs and decidedly less European-oriented. Its domestic politics have been characterized as moving from "Kemalist" to "neo-Ottoman," suggesting a stronger emphasis on grandeur, authoritarianism, and religious influence. Always a staunch NATO ally, she is now faced with issues on which Turkish and NATO

> policies may diverge, such as the creation of a ballistic missile defense system and attitudes toward both Russia and Iran. Immediate regional issues, including the Middle East peace process, Syrian instability, Palestinian statehood, and the future of Libya are now at the top of Turkey's security agenda.
>
> Thus, NATO continues to recognize Turkey's crucial strategic importance but is now dealing with a member who is making more independent foreign policy decisions and is focused on its regional issues, many of which are of lesser import to the alliance. As the United States found out in its execution of the war in Iraq, Turkey's active cooperation cannot be taken for granted if such a move could hurt its posture or stature in the Middle East.[46]

Still, the West views Erdoğan's personality and policies as dangerously too Islamist leaning and suggesting an agenda supporting the revival of a neo-Ottoman era in the Middle East region. Many Middle Eastern state and nonstate actors also share this view since there is no love lost in the Arab states in particular between them and Turkey, given the Ottoman Empire's rule over them. The AKP and Erdoğan's greatest moments in terms of regional popularity occurred from 2002 until about 2013. Apparently, the diehard Sunni Arab states, with the exception of Qatar, are not willing to forgive the Erdoğan government for expressing support for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. That bad blood between them continues to play out in regional and even international politics, as seen with the United Nations Security Council nonpermanent seat selection that excluded Turkey. At the same time, the AKP and Erdoğan remain important players in the region, and, in the eyes of the pious, they are admired and viewed as the mantle for a palatable Islamic democracy worthy of replicating. That said, the prospects for an "Ottoman resurgence" are now much lower than they were few years ago.

Conclusion

Despite the scandals and serious challenges to Erdoğan's power and authority, he and the AKP undoubtedly still have a power base and resources at their disposal. In December 2013, one Turkish citizen expressed his feelings about the president: "Look around, see the construction and infrastructure; this is what Erdoğan has done for us."[47] With the 2014 elections taking place in summer 2014, Istanbul traffic occasionally displayed an "AKP" license plate or bumper sticker on some cars. A Turkish military officer remarked that much rural support for Erdoğan still existed while the upscale areas favor secularism and the military.[48] In particular, he said that the poor admire Erdoğan because he has provided crucial government subsidies for all universities and for a revamped health care system. The president has initiated many municipal projects, but he warned that these subsidies are not sustainable in the long term and that Turkey has a significantly young demographic that will demand future jobs. The economy is already seeing signs of strains.

Another young man indicated that the Turkish economy was stronger five years ago but is now slowing down. He, along with everyone else interviewed, stressed that Erdoğan

will win because no one is running against him in the 2014 elections. And he was right—Erdoğan won rather easily.

Something else has happened in Turkey during the Erdoğan years. It is visibly noticeable that more and more women in Turkey are wearing head scarves. Women also face high rates of domestic violence and abuse, as reported in the *Hurriyet Daily*. The cause for women's rights and freedoms still has a long way to go in Turkey despite higher rates of urban women's education and employment. According to the source in Ankara, trends toward "Islamization" in Turkey stem from the AKP. He also claimed that the wives of businessmen and politicians who wear the head scarf provide the "legitimacy" and advantage for the men to secure business deals or even get elected. These rising trends in Islamism put Turkey's secular character and institutions at stake.[49]

Indeed, Turkey has much at stake domestically, regionally, and globally. At the same time, it possesses powerful potential for maintaining democratic political authority, hard and soft power influence, and the ability to affect regional affairs in dynamic ways in the twenty-first century. If the opportunities are lost to extremism, terrorism, political scandals and incompetence, ideological competition, and authoritarianism, then one question will have to be addressed. As Rachel Sharon-Krespin put it, "Who lost Turkey?"[50]

In late December 2013, a young Istanbul University professor emphatically declared that "the Turkish people won't allow the death of democracy."[51] She did not specify whether that would be a secular or Islamic democracy.

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