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Turkey: What have the Islamists brought to the Republic?



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- **The Turkish Republic: a historic overview:**

Since the AK Party (the Justice and Development Party), the Party which some analysts designate as a “moderate islamist” party, won the general National Assembly elections in 2002, followed by winning the last general elections in July 2007 with a significant majority; considerable changes have occurred in the Turkish Foreign policy, as well as in its domestic politics. We might as well assume that Turkey is now living a new era of transformation in its entire political system.

Since the end of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the Turkish republic in 1924, the Turkish political system is based on the foundations of Kemalism: the legacy of Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, the revolutionary Army officer, statesman, the founder of the Turkish Republic and its first president. During his rule, and under a deep influence of the French Revolution, Ataturk initiated a series of political, social, cultural and economic reforms, which transformed Turkey into a modern and secular nation- state. These reforms commonly referred to as “Kemalism”, basically consisted of two pillars: strict laicism, and assimilative nationalism.

As for the first pillar: the strict, sometimes even extremist laicism, considered religion as an obscurantist, retrograde force inside the Turkish society, preventing it from realizing any real progress towards modernization. Hence, the Turkish kemalists worked hard to expel religion from the public sphere; by adopting a series of politics against the religious institution, the symbol of the Ottoman Empire, such as changing the Turkish alphabet from Arabic to Latin letters, abolishing Islamic education and Sufist movements...

Although some of these measures resemble the politics adopted by the French Revolution, it is quite clear that the Turkish regime was and is still trying to guarantee the control the religious sphere by the State instead of opting for the separation between Religion and State. Therefore, one can notice that the State in Turkey is keeping a tight control over the Islamic institution all over the country.

Modern Turkey, also following the French model, attempted to assimilate its cultural and religious minorities, on one common basis: the Turkish nationalism. Although this model was relatively successful in France, it wasn't that much of a success in Turkey: the Turkish republic refused the mere notion of cultural pluralism. Consequently, it denied cultural and civil rights to some of its minorities, on top of which the Kurdish minority, majorly concentrated in the South eastern part of the country. Thus, the Modern Turkish republic seems less tolerant towards its minorities than the Ottoman Empire was.

All along the Turkish republic history, these two foundations, basically aiming to build a Modern and developed Turkey: kemalism and Turkish nationalism, were strictly “protected” by some of the Turkish institutions, such as the Army who is considered to be an influent political player devoted to kemalism. In fact, since the first democratic elections in Turkey in

1950, the Turkish military institution was closely observing the political arena, and it interfered directly three times (in 1960, 1971 and 1980) as the “guardian of the Kemalist Republic”, and one time in 1997 by a "soft Coup d'Etat", in order to keep the political actions on the “kemalist” track.

However, this doesn't mean that the Turkish society, especially during the early years of the Republic, accepted these new reforms and policies easily; most conservative, rather religious, categories of the Turkish were somehow resentful towards them, creating a debate about the true Turkish identity: Middle Eastern or European, Islamic or secular?

Anyhow, International factors interfered to mask this debate, especially during the Cold War. With the Soviet threat on borders and the delicate power balance characterizing this period, Turkey took decisive steps towards resolving this “identity crisis”: joining the NATO, establishing anti- soviet missile bases on its borders... Hence, Turkey chose to become part of the Western Bloc. This fact is translated nowadays with the Turkish candidature to the European Union.

- **Kemalist institution and the formation of islamist parties in Turkey:**

Certainly, this strict secular and modernizing foundation of the Turkish regime have had a tremendous influence on various aspects of the Turkish politics, whether on the domestic or the foreign level. Nevertheless, the end of the Cold War and the overwhelming Islamic revival movement growing all across the Islamic World, were the main factors behind regenerating some of the unsolved identity questions: as for the domestic level, these factors generated new emerging wave of political parties with an Islamic background, with a growing popularity among the Turkish public opinion.

Meanwhile, the Kemalists inside the Turkish regime were still considering Islam as an obstacle in the face of development and democracy, and a threat to the republic itself. Hence, the Turkish regime interfered by taking strict measures against those parties. For example, the Turkish Supreme Court took the decision of banning the *Fazilet Partisi* (the Virtue Party) in 2001, and before that, the "soft Coup d'Etat" in 1997, and banning the *Refah* or the Welfare Party in 1998.

The strict measures taken by the Turkish kemalist institutions against this rising tide of islamist parties had its effects on their political ideology as well as their political program and policies. An excellent example is offered by the AKP (Justice and Development Party). Created in 2001, as a representative of the reformist trend of Islamists inside the banned

Fazilet Partisi (Virtue Party), the AKP benefited from the previous experiences of Turkish islamist parties: for instance, the *Refah Partisi* was a popular islamist party, which was practically the largest party in Turkey under Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan in 1996. Nevertheless, the coalition government of Erbakan was forced out of power by the Turkish military in 1997, due to being suspected of having an Islamic agenda, which was viewed as a violation to the state secularism, the core of kemalism. The same scenario repeated once again with the *Fazilet Partisi* (Virtue Party) in 2001, which was found unconstitutional by the Turkish Constitutional Court, and therefore became banned. After the party was banned, the party activists were divided into two trends, each establishing a new party: traditional islamists, creating the *Saadat Partisi* (the Felicity Party), and reformists creating the famous AKP (Justice and Development Party).

- **The AKP (Justice and development Party): what changes have the islamists brought to the Turkish politics?**

The leaders of the latter made serious, dynamic and essential revisions to their political ideology: embracing the secularism of the State, defending the Turkish candidature to the European Union as top priority on their foreign policy agenda, working for the enhancement of democracy, the respect of Human Rights, and supporting open market economy. In other words, the AKP promotes a "conservative democratic" policy. In the words of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, current Prime Minister and AKP chairman, the AKP is based on "*Human and not religious principals*". Hence, the Party developed its ideology very smartly, turning it into a "conservative", rather than islamist, background.

Also, the Party gave a good example of internal democratic mechanisms while conducting the internal party elections. In addition to what has been mentioned, the economic reforms, social stability, and dynamic foreign policy adopted and promoted by the party made its popularity grow, especially among the emerging, still somewhat conservative, Turkish middle class and small bourgeoisie.

What is important for the scope of this paper is the new foreign policy promoted by the AKP, and adopted once the Party formed the government. Since Recep Tayyip Erdogan became Prime Minister of Turkey in 2002, there have been tremendous changes in the Turkish Foreign policy. Turkish policy is becoming more dynamic and more active in other areas of the world which were not present on its agenda previously, such as the Middle East and the Islamic World, as we will discuss later on in this paper.

In fact, this new active foreign policy is the fruit of the theoretical work of Prof. Ahmet Davutoglu, university professor, ambassador and consultant of the Prime Minister, and

currently, the Turkish minister of Foreign Affairs. Davutoglu created a new trend in the Turkish policy, known as the "neo- ottomanism", according to which Turkey should start acting like a "regional power": getting more involved in the regional affairs, having a stronger, self confident and more open- minded foreign policy towards critical issues (such as the Kurdish problem...etc); and above all, playing a more active role in the former colonies of the Ottoman Empire. In other words, Turkey has a strategic role to play in three major circles of action: Middle East, central Asia, Europe and the Balkans.

As this new foreign policy may seem of one accord at first sight, but in fact, it is highly controversial, as the identity questions still burst in: on the domestic level, most seculars fear this "neo- ottomanism" as a symbol of crawling back to the Ottoman Empire, and a violation of the codes of the Republic, who had, for long decades, ignored its imperial legacy, and concentrated only on its domestic "cultural revolution", and its direct interests, such as the candidature to the EU.

However, the promoters of this trend argue that "neo- ottomanism" isn't about a regression to the Ottoman Empire, but it is in fact a more open and active policy towards the former Turkish "zone of influence", this time using "soft power" and not military intervention. The objective is to enhance the Turkish position as a "regional power" and its image as a bridge between the Islamic and the Western Worlds, at the same time, creating good relations with the neighbor states in the region.

On the international level, another controversy is raised by this new trend: On one hand, the United States, as well as most European countries finds the growing Turkish role in its regional environment as an excellent mediator between the West and the Arab and Islamic world; and an exceptional model of an "Islamic, moderate and democratic" country. On the other hand, some of the former colonies of the Ottoman Empire still perceive this role (especially when it's supported by the West) with suspicion. On one hand, some of these countries, especially the small, fragile or newly independent states, are still resentful towards the historic colonial inheritance of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, some of the relatively important state in the region (such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia for instance) are uncomfortable with this growing Turkish role, feeling that it might hinder their own role as strategic partners to the West, or strip away some of their influence as regional powers.

- **Examples of a new and active Turkish Foreign policy towards the Middle East:**

One last aspect we should point out is that this new perspective made tremendous changes in the way Turkey handled some of the most critical issues of its foreign policy's agenda. For instance, Turkey managed to take a firm stance against the war on Iraq in 2003, denying it from using the Turkish territory to launch attacks on the Iraqi lands. Bearing in mind that Turkey has been an active member of the NATO for decades, and is considered to be a strategic ally to the USA; it managed during this international crisis to keep a large space of

maneuver in front of the USA in order to protect its southern borders from the expected chaos that might result from the decomposition of Saddam Hussein's regime.

However, this harsh stance against the war on Iraq didn't stop the USA from referring to Turkey as a model that should be copied by most of the Islamic countries. The chaos following Baghdad's collapse forced Turkey into interfering more and more with Middle Eastern issues, especially when it pertains to protecting the integrity of its territories against the Kurdish threat laying in Northern Iraq.

Historically, the kemalist secular Republic has had rather close ties with Israel on various levels (diplomatic, military and economic), and rather cold relations with the Arab World, due mostly to historic disputes over the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, since the AKP formed the government in 2002, and the "neo- ottomanism" began to leave its marks on the Turkish foreign policy, there have been important changes on this matter: the AKP is trying to benefit from its assets as an islamist, moderate, and democratically elected party in order to increase its presence in the Middle Eastern Affairs, on top of which remains the Arab- Israeli conflict.

Also, Turkey made an excellent example of mediating conflicts in the Middle East during the role of the AKP: mediating the peace negotiations between Damascus and Tel Aviv, also hosting the Palestinian national dialogue. Turkey seems to play a more effective role in the Middle East that should, in fact, be played by those Arab countries who are considered as "regional powers".

Turkey also proved its capacity of adopting a self-directed, more effective diplomacy in the Middle East, without having to depend on its strategic allies (the USA, the EU, or even Israel). Although Turkey considers itself as a part of the Western World, and a candidate to the EU, it has managed to keep rather warm relations with some countries who were considered to be "castaway" members of the international community (or in the words of former US President Bush, the "axis of evil"), such as Syria and Iran. Based on mutual interests, Turkey managed to keep a Turkish- Syrian- Iranian practically unified alliance against the Kurdish separatism.

For Ankara, the Kurdish matter represents a top priority case on its political agenda, despite the concerns Turkey has about Iranian nuclear profile. In fact, the latter matter doesn't seem to bother Turkey as much as long as Teheran cooperates with Ankara on the level of security, against the PKK (Kurdish Labour Party), and on the economic level, as Teheran also provides Turkey with Natural Gaz. Also, Teheran seems to welcome the Turkish membership of the EU, as it hinders the "clash of civilizations", trying at the same time to end this

international embargo imposed on it, by increasing bilateral commercial exchange with Ankara.

Despite Damascus has not been in good terms with Ankara for a long period because of their disputes over water resources, Ankara's close relations with Israel, and Damascus support to the separatists Turkish Kurds of the PKK (Kurdish Labor Party); things started to change since 2005: Trying to break through the international embargo imposed upon it, motivated by a growing fear of Kurdish separatist tendency, Damascus decided to cut down its support for the PKK, as well as to stop being a shelter for its leader, Abdullah Oglan. Hence, Turkey seeks strengthening its relations with Syria in order to build this alliance against the Kurdish threat, as well as playing a bigger role in the Arab Mashreq region. In this context, we can notice the Turkish mediation for the Syrian- Israeli negotiations.

Another proof of this independent foreign policy in the Middle East, the Erdogan government also started placing the Arab- Israeli conflict as an important issue on its foreign policy agenda. Since Erdogan's first mandate in 2002 harsh criticism characterized his discourse towards Israel and the Israeli policy towards Gaza and the West Bank. This discourse was actually very clear during the Israeli war on Gaza at the end of 2008. The Erdogan government tried to build good relations with Hamas leaders, in order to help reduce the Iranian influence over them. However, Ankara managed to keep its historic relations with Israel, despite this harsh criticism to the Israeli policy.

At the same time, Turkey seeks to strengthen its relations with all the major Arab and Islamic countries, bearing in mind this key concept of "bridging the gap between the Islamic world and the West". Therefore, Turkey has increased its level of cooperation with Saudi Arabia, on economic as well as diplomatic levels, both countries share mutual economic interests (growing Saudi investments in Turkey...), as well as a strong and strategic partnership with the USA, a common stance on some issues like the Palestinian cause, and they are both uncomfortable with the Iranian nuclear profile.

On another hand, Ankara has been also enhancing its bilateral relations with Cairo, especially while having new issues of fruitful cooperation, such as energy and regional security.

It is remarkable that Turkey and Egypt share common characteristics and position on various issues: a strategic partner: they are both regional powers who have a strategic partnership with the USA, they are both resentful towards the Iranian regime since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and they are in good terms with Israel.

Finally, we should note that the Kemalist trend inside the Turkish regime is not pleased with these changes in the Foreign policy. In fact, they see them as regression back to Ottomanism, and an unwanted growing place for religion in the Turkish public sphere, that is supposed to remain secular. At the same time, and as was mentioned earlier, both Riyad and Cairo are not, nonetheless, very comfortable with this growing Turkish role in the Middle Eastern affairs, as it might lead to withdrawing more powers away from the two major Arab countries, considering their already declining influence on such regional controversial issues.

- **Conclusion: Is Turkey a role model for the Middle Eastern countries?**

Concluding this draft paper, we might as well assume that these new positive changes in the Turkish Foreign policy are basically the fruit of the active and innovative contribution of the AK Party, which brought back more dynamism and credibility to the Turkish regime: establishing a growing credibility in the Turkish democracy, especially after the repetitive military interventions in the public sphere. In fact, even if this particular respect to the principals of democracy in Turkey is directly related to the Turkish candidature to the EU, and the European committee observing closely all the interactions inside the Turkish public sphere, the Turkish republic is still considered to be a successful model in terms of internal democracy and foreign policy dynamism, protecting Turkish national interests while trying to use its soft power to become a real effective regional power. Finally, we should admit that the exceptional model presented by the AK Party, of either respecting internal and external democracy, adapting itself with the general secular framework of the state, developing its theories and ideology in order to formulate a genuine democratic, pro-European policies, that are, at the same time, conserving strong ties with its Islamic background and traditions, is an inspiring experience for all Islamic movements around the world.