



Turkey Transformed:

The Origins and Evolution of
Authoritarianism and Islamization
Under the AKP

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Executive Summary



On June 7, 2015, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its majority in Parliament, which it had maintained for 12 years. But, as is increasingly clear, losing an election did not mean losing power. From the presidential palace, the AKP's de facto leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has ensured that no other political force is given a chance to govern. Instead, Erdoğan has called early elections and relaunched the war against the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in a rather transparent attempt to rally the Turkish nationalist vote.

Should Erdoğan and the AKP prove successful in this gambit, they will likely seek to transform Turkey. "Today is the day that Turkey rises from its ashes," Erdoğan said upon ascending the presidency in August 2014. "It's the day the process to build the new Turkey gains strength."¹ However, during the AKP's tenure,

Turkey has already been transformed, though perhaps not in the way that Western observers expected.

When the AKP was created in 2000, it cast itself as a "post-Islamist" party leaving behind the ideological baggage of previous, failed attempts at governance arising out of Turkey's Islamist tradition and representing a democratic movement bent on weakening the hold of entrenched elites on the Turkish state. With this mission, it quickly captured the goodwill of the West as well as Turkish liberals.

Fifteen years later, the behavior of the AKP has forced a reconsideration of this assumption. Erdoğan's "new Turkey" has come to mean something other than the consolidated democracy the AKP promised. Instead, in the domestic realm,

Turkish government policies have grown strongly authoritarian and repressive, while increasingly tinged with Islamic rhetoric. In the area of foreign affairs, Turkish policies are less and less aligned with those of Turkey's Western allies and increasingly anti-Western and sectarian in nature. The "new Turkey" espoused by the AKP appears to have more in common with the *Milli Görüş* movement it sprung from than with the reformist, democratizing party it claimed to be.

Determining which of these is the real AKP—the post-Islamist party of liberal hope or the autocrats of a New Turkey—is crucial to understanding both the Turkey of today and its plausible future trajectory. What went wrong? Did the AKP project get derailed by Western alienation or, as some would argue, the excesses of its increasingly narcissistic leader? Or is the problem, rather, that Western and Turkish observers alike misread the AKP from the start and saw only what they wanted to see? Was the AKP's early liberal democratic platform a façade and a tactical ploy, its real objectives all along the autocratic and Islamist ones it espouses today?

These questions cannot be answered without knowing the AKP's relationship and attitudes toward the ideological tradition from which it emerged and the reasons for its apparent split with its political forbearers. This calls for the investigation of two particular questions, which have so far received only limited scholarly attention. The first is the ideological origins of the *Milli Görüş* movement, the ideological forefather of Turkey's modern Islamists. The second issue is the split that occurred in the Islamist movement between 1998 and 2000, when the AKP began to rise from the ashes after the Virtue Party had been closed down and Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan removed from power by the Turkish military. Knowing this will allow a more informed analysis of the AKP's 12 years in power and its current political agenda, illuminating the ideological ambitions driving its pursuit of a "New Turkey."

What emerges is a picture of remarkable continuity: The leading figures of Turkish political Islam have all been steeped in an anti-

imperialist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Western worldview. And, while the AKP rose to power by declaring a break from that tradition, its leaders transformed the movement's political tactics while preserving its ideological objectives and ambitions.

The AKP's Ideological Origins

For the first eight decades of the Turkish Republic's existence, political Islam struggled to gain a foothold in the country's public life. It was systematically excluded in the Kemalist period, but slowly allowed back from the cold when the Cold War made Islam a bulwark against the chief enemy: communism. It was not until Erbakan succeeded in mobilizing the Anatolian bourgeoisie and later made inroads into the working classes under a single ideological banner—that of the *Milli Görüş* movement—that political Islam emerged as an independent political force.

A closer study of *Milli Görüş* suggests that the movement is far more radical than is commonly assumed. Led by Erbakan, this movement had its origins in the Naqshbandi order's Khalidi branch, which has gradually become a dominant social force in Turkish Islamic circles. This order is distinct from most Sufi orders by its strong commitment to Shari'a and its political nature; in the 19th century, it brought orthodox Islamic ideas from the Middle East into a Turkey that had remained attached to more moderate practices. In addition, the Turkish Islamist movement drew inspiration from abroad: in the early 20th century, from European fascism; and following World War II, from the Muslim Brotherhood movement and its affiliates. It is, therefore, no wonder that *Milli Görüş* was strongly committed to the Islamization of the state, heavily infused with anti-Western concepts, and inundated with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

Erbakan's dominance over Turkish political Islam lasted for 30 years. His successes, including becoming the prime minister of a coalition government in 1996, came from being able to continually find, reach out to, and recruit new constituencies under the Islamist ideological banner of his party. Erbakan's tenure as prime minister,

however, came to an abrupt end as the military intervened to quash his blatantly Islamist agenda.

This historic moment—working three decades to ascend to the pinnacle of power only to have it come crashing down in a year—made a significant impact on the younger generation of Turkish Islamists. The AKP’s rebranding of political Islam learned from these mistakes and developed new tactics for not repeating them.

The shock of Erbakan’s ouster led Islamist intellectuals to reexamine their ideological approach to politics and prompted a seeming evolution in their thought. Up until the late 1990s, the dominant Islamist worldview included a rejection of the West, democracy, and modernity. Following the 1997 coup, these ideas went through rapid change. Islamist thinkers concluded that, following the events of 1997, an embrace of democracy and support for the EU had become a necessity in order to promote Islam, as it was the only way to gain the upper hand over the state establishment that had removed Erbakan from power. At the same time, the 1997 coup tilted the balance in Western circles toward viewing the Turkish state and its secular authoritarianism, rather than the Islamists, as the main problem facing Turkey’s democracy and European integration, providing a strategic opportunity for Turkey’s Islamists to gain the goodwill of the West.

From the ashes of Erbakan’s failure arose the AKP. Though it sprung from the Milli Görüş movement, the AKP’s leaders claimed to have left this ideological baggage behind, portraying it as a “post-Islamist” party of genuine democrats that sought to overcome a sclerotic, semi-authoritarian system of “tutelage” by the Turkish army and senior levels of the bureaucracy. Turkish liberals—who had come to see the authoritarianism of the Turkish state as the result of a culturally estranged, Western-oriented ruling class violating the culture, religion, and traditions of a Muslim people—embraced this narrative and believed that the rise of “oppressed” religious conservatives would deliver freedom. Likewise, the AKP’s apparent commitment to democratic reforms, EU membership, and the alliance with the United States led most Western leaders

and analysts to take this transformation at face value.

With the benefit of hindsight, the speed of the transformation and its self-serving nature generates doubts about its sincerity. It appears that a considerable portion of the rationale for the Islamist movement’s transformation was tactical. Leading figures even admitted as much—noting that their ideals had been defeated, and it was time to move on, barring which they would never be able to reach power.

The “New Turkey” Project: Authoritarianism and Islamization

The AKP’s ideological roots only tell part of the story. It must also be evaluated on the basis of its record of governance. This record is increasingly consistent with the picture painted above of a staunch Islamist movement that embraced the technical mechanics of electoral democracy, but not its underlying values, and underwent a rebranding process to make itself more palatable to domestic as well as international constituencies.

The “New Turkey” project can, analytically speaking, be separated into three areas—the political, the cultural, and the economic—in which the country that is being built differs considerably from the Turkey of the past. The political system that the leaders of the AKP are working to implement is distinctly illiberal and autocratic, treating public support for their rule as something to be engineered in elections that may be free but certainly not fair. This political system is to be undergirded by a cultural change, a Turkey that the government is seeking to make solidly Islamic in its values and worldview. And the economy of this new Turkey is essentially a crony capitalist system under the ruling party’s control.

While Erdoğan and the AKP did manage to break down a semi-authoritarian form of government, as soon as they had evicted the erstwhile rulers, they immediately began promoting a presidential form of government without checks and balances, a system of one-man rule tailored to Erdoğan’s person. In other words, the AKP has aspired to build *another* form of semi-authoritarian

government to replace the regime of military tutelage. So far, they have failed to implement this system de jure. Yet Erdoğan has already, for all practical purposes, imposed this system on Turkey—and in the meantime, kept the skeleton of the “tutelage” system in place. Remarkably, Erdoğan now seeks to enshrine such a system in law, declaring that “whether one accepts it or not, Turkey’s administrative system has changed. Now, what should be done is to update this de facto situation in the legal framework of the constitution.”²

In addition to creeping authoritarianism, Erdoğan and the AKP have also embarked on a gradual Islamization of Turkish society. Prior to 2012, Islamization was mainly driven by the shifting of the incentive structure in society: Beards and headscarves were now subtly, and often less than subtly, encouraged or required for public sector jobs or to land government contracts. At the same time, it was possible to discern a subtle but powerful effort toward Islamization, particularly in smaller towns of Anatolia where the state-supported peer pressure made it wise to fast during Ramadan, close shops during Friday prayers, and abstain from alcohol, if it was even available anymore.³

Since 2011, the Islamization of Turkey has become more overt. The AKP, whose leader has spoken of his intent to raise “pious generations,” has undertaken major reforms to Islamize every sector of Turkey’s education system. Under the AKP’s education reforms, the amount of compulsory religious education in schools has increased, and tens of thousands of students have been funneled into religious schools. Similarly, the rapid growth in both size and influence of the state directorate of religious affairs—which is really a state directorate of Sunni Islam—lends an official stamp to the government’s growing admonitions to live according to Sunni Islamic teachings, offering religious decrees governing citizens’ day-to-day lives. The government has worked actively to reduce Turkish women’s participation in public life, giving sweeping pronouncements of how women should live their lives, from how many children they should have

to how motherhood should be a woman’s sole career. Increasing misogynistic rhetoric by the AKP government has been paired with soaring rates of domestic violence and high-profile examples of brutal attacks against women. In the economic realm, the AKP has built an economic system based on crony capitalism, uprooting entrenched and mostly secular and Western-oriented big business to cultivate a new class of loyal Islamic businesses, the so-called “Anatolian Tigers.”

Conclusions and Implications

Turkey and the AKP appear to enjoy a certain uniformity of opinion among Washington observers. In 2003, the hope for a new, more democratic chapter in Turkish politics was shared widely, and not just in Washington. By early 2014, opinion began to shift and, by the time of the June 2015 parliamentary election, a new consensus had recognized the increasingly authoritarian direction the country had taken. But such unanimity hides a certain analytical superficiality; observers have rarely engaged in a deeper reflection of what the failure of the AKP to live up to the potential originally ascribed to it means for our understanding of Turkey and the AKP itself.

This study’s excavation of the ideological and political origins of the AKP sheds light both on Turkey’s current situation and its future trajectory. In the process, however, it also yields insights about some of the myopic or unwarranted assumptions underlying policy thinking about Turkey that have implications for policymakers going forward.

Conclusions

Continuity, Not Change

The AKP presented itself in 2002 as a new “post-Islamist” party that had broken with this current of Turkish political Islamism. There can be little doubt today that a considerable portion of the rationale for the Islamist movement’s transformation was tactical. Leading figures even admitted as much – noting that their ideals had been defeated and it was time to move on, barring which they would never be able to reach power.

Transformation Already Underway

The AKP has engaged in a concerted and sustained attempt to construct a Turkey that differs considerably from that which has existed for the last nine decades. Already, the AKP's "new Turkey" project is in motion and the nature of the transformations that the AKP has initiated suggest that, regardless of who is in power, the repercussions will be felt well into the future.

Shared Ideology, Not Just Personal Ambition

As Erdoğan's pursuit of an authoritarian political system has become increasingly bald-faced—with rule of law, civil liberties, and former allies sacrificed in the quest for centralized power—the hope that he would be challenged from within the AKP has become more prominent. But while Erdoğan's personal ambitions and strained relationships among the AKP's leadership have certainly contributed to the path Turkey has taken in recent years, they are only part of the story. Although Erdoğan's irritable disposition, blunt methods, and impetuosity might not be traits shared by others within the AKP, that does not mean that the goals he is working towards are not commonly shared nor informed by a worldview that prevails among the party.

Democracy Misconstrued

The AKP was seen—within Turkey and throughout the West—as a democratizing force not simply because of the policies it espoused. It also played into a diagnosis of the pathologies of Turkey's political institutions that had become widespread among the liberal intelligentsia throughout the 1990s and was seemingly proven right by the 1997 coup: namely, that there existed a structural opposition and cultural alienation between the Turkish state and society. The rise of the AKP occurred in an intellectual context that was prepared to accept its vision of Turkish Islamic civilization as a democratizing mission.

But this view of both the pathologies of the Turkish political system and how it might be fixed conflates institutions and culture. By

trying to identify a particular social actor that would represent all of Turkey, liberals ignored the plurality of ethnicities, faiths, and identities that constitute modern Turkish society.

Implications

Lasting Transformation

The nature of the transformations that the AKP has initiated suggest that, even if Erdoğan's ploys to keep his party in power fail, the repercussions of their 12 years in power will be felt well into the future.

Already, the basic institutions of democracy have increasingly been compromised in favor of an informal power grab by the country's president. This erosion of the rule of law and civil liberties will not only continue as long as Erdoğan is in office, but could establish a precedent for future holders of the office to invoke. Why would they accept constrained authority once the presidency has been unmoored from the constitution?

Similarly, the AKP's social policies, although not yet coercive, were designed to affect society's identity in the long term. The interpretation of religion that is being transmitted through official channels is, increasingly, the understanding of Sunni Islam embraced by the Khalidi Naqshbandi order: a highly ideological authoritarian and anti-Western interpretation of Islam. And, if Erdoğan and the AKP remain in power, it is likely only a question of time before coercive elements of their social project become apparent.

Legacy of Polarization and Instability

The first decade of the AKP's rule was accompanied by economic growth and the promise of a peace process that would greatly ameliorate the Kurdish problem. But its legacy will be the complete opposite. Erdoğan and the AKP have put Turkey at risk of protracted internal instability.

U.S.-Turkish Partnership Trivialized

The challenge facing U.S. policymakers dealing with Turkey is balancing short-term tactical priorities with long-term strategic ones. However, with an increasingly complicated sectarian conflict metastasizing through the region, U.S. policy has more often than not focused on immediate regional challenges, and the role Ankara could play in them, rather than on the political and social developments unfolding within Turkey. As a result, Turkey's ideological drift took place within the broader context of U.S. encouragement of Turkish designs. Now, what was once a strategic partnership has been reduced to, at best, an instrumental relationship.

Introduction



On June 7, 2015, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its majority in Parliament, which it had maintained for 12 years—longer than any prior Turkish political force since the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1950. But, as is increasingly clear, losing an election did not mean losing power. From the presidential palace, the AKP's de facto leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has maximized and exceeded the authorities of the presidency to ensure that no other political force is given a chance to govern. Instead, Erdoğan has called early elections and has relaunched the war against the Kurdish separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in a rather transparent attempt to rally the Turkish nationalist vote.

The AKP, and Erdoğan, were initially welcomed at home and abroad as genuine democrats that sought to overcome a

sclerotic, semi-authoritarian system of “tutelage” by the Turkish army and senior levels of the bureaucracy. While the AKP sprung from the tradition of Turkish political Islam, committed to the Islamization of the state and with an ideology heavily infused with anti-Western and anti-Semitic concepts, the AKP claimed to have left this baggage behind. The attitude of its leaders, as well as their apparent commitment to democratic reforms, European Union membership, and the alliance with the United States, led most Western leaders and analysts to take this transformation at face value.

Fifteen years later, the behavior of the AKP, and particularly President Erdoğan, has forced a reconsideration of this assumption. In the domestic realm, Turkish government policies have grown strongly authoritarian and repressive, while increasingly tinged

with Islamic rhetoric. In the last few years, the AKP has undertaken far-reaching reforms of Turkey's education sector, focusing on increasing its religious component; the country's religious affairs directorate is taking on an ever-growing role in society; and the government has worked actively to reduce Turkish women's participation in public life. Far from a liberal democracy, Turkey is developing a form of Islamic authoritarianism.

In the area of foreign affairs, Turkish policies are less and less aligned with those of Turkey's Western allies. Instead, Turkey has broken with its cautious foreign policy tradition, particularly with regards to the Middle East, to embrace regime change in Syria and a policy aimed at supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as other Islamist groups, across the region. As the AKP's domestic political power increased, its foreign policy became more anti-Western and sectarian in nature, dominated by support for Islamist movements—whether peaceful ones like Ennahda in Tunisia, militant ones like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or terrorist groups like Hamas and the Nusra front in Syria. In both the domestic and foreign realms, the AKP appears to have more in common with the *Milli Görüş* movement it sprung from than with the post-Islamist party it claimed to be in the early 2000s.

What went wrong? Did the AKP project get derailed by Western alienation or, as some would argue, the excesses of its increasingly narcissistic leader? Or is the problem, rather, that Western and Turkish observers alike misread the AKP from the start and saw only what they wanted to see? These are the main questions this study seeks to answer. It does so in two parts. The first part is a thorough re-evaluation of the ideological and political origins of the AKP, in particular the split of the Islamist movement in 2001 that led to the party's creation and facilitated its success. A second part studies in detail the twin facets of the AKP's decade-long rule: the growing authoritarianism and Islamization of society.

The Real AKP: Ideological and Political Origins



Introduction

For the first eight decades of the Turkish Republic's existence, political Islam struggled to gain a foothold in the country's public life. From being banished to the peripheries of society by the Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, to being slowly allowed back into the political sphere as counter to communist influence, Islam's role was limited for the first half century. It was not until Necmettin Erbakan succeeded in mobilizing the Anatolian bourgeoisie and later made inroads into the working classes under a single ideological banner—that of the *Milli Görüş* movement, one committed to the Islamization of the state and heavily infused with anti-Western and anti-Semitic concepts—that political Islam emerged as an independent

political force. Still, it took him nearly three decades to mount a significant challenge to Turkey's established political parties and take power. Erbakan's tenure as prime minister, however, came to an abrupt end as the military intervened to quash his blatantly Islamist agenda.

From the ashes of Erbakan's Welfare Party emerged a young generation of Islamists, determined to learn the lessons of his failure. Styling themselves as reformers, they created a new party—the AKP—designed to have both broader appeal and a more palatable political agenda. Though the AKP sprang from the *Milli Görüş* movement, it claimed to have left this ideological baggage behind, portraying itself as “post-Islamist” party.

Yet, the AKP's tenure belies this characterization. The seemingly

democratic reforms that endeared the AKP to both Turkish liberals and the West during its first years in power have been replaced by increasingly authoritarian policies and Islamist-tinged rhetoric. The “New Turkey” espoused by Erdoğan today is very different from the liberal democratic Muslim model that many believed Turkey would become under the AKP.

Determining which of these is the real AKP—the post-Islamist party of liberal hope or the autocrats of a New Turkey—is crucial to understanding both the Turkey of today and its plausible future trajectory. Was the original project of reform derailed by external forces, a hostile EU, for example, or the personality and ambitions of its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan? Or was the AKP’s early liberal democratic platform a façade and a tactical ploy, its real objectives all along the autocratic and Islamist ones it espouses today?

These questions cannot be answered without knowing the starting point of the country’s current leadership, its relationship and attitudes toward the ideological tradition from which it emerged, and the reasons for its apparent split with its political forbearers. This calls for the investigation of two particular questions, which have so far received only limited scholarly attention. The first is the ideological origins of the *Milli Görüş* movement, the ideological forefather of Turkey’s modern Islamists. The second issue is the split that occurred in the Islamist movement between 1998 and 2000. Knowing this will allow a more informed analysis of the AKP’s 12 years in power and its current political agenda, illuminating the ideological ambitions driving its pursuit of a “new Turkey.”

Little systematic attention has been paid to the origins of the *Milli Görüş* movement’s worldview, although it was a formative experience not only for Erdoğan but practically for the entire crop of Turkey’s current leaders. Nor have the motivations behind the rapid and profound split that occurred in the Turkish Islamic movement following the collapse of the Erbakan-led government, a split in which a group that was to become the AKP appeared to reject the *Milli Görüş* tradition, been subjected to exacting scrutiny.

This section of the paper traces the ideological content and political history of the Turkish Islamic movement in an attempt to answer both these questions. What emerges is a picture of remarkable continuity: The leading figures of Turkish political Islam have all been steeped in an anti-imperialist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Western worldview, and each of the major advances that the Islamic movement has made in Turkish political life have been marked by pragmatic splits and innovations that transformed the movement’s political tactics while preserving its ideological objectives and ambitions.

Ideological Origins and Development of Turkish Islamism

After several hundred years as the seat of Islamic governance, Turkey saw the role of Islam in its national and political identity significantly transformed in the span of a year—with the creation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the abolition of the Caliphate the following year. Within several decades, however, Islam began to reappear in the public sphere, brought out both by social and economic transformations and political calculations of the secular government. Still, the years spent in the political and geographic wilderness by Turkey’s religious conservatives left a deep and lasting mark on the ideological content of Turkish Islamic thought in the 20th century. Gone was the reform-minded Islam that sought to marry modernity, nationalism, and religious piety. In its stead, the radical ideas of political Islam brewing in other Middle Eastern capitals and imbibed by Turkish students seeking instruction abroad began to seep into Turkey’s Sufi orders, especially the Naqshbandiya.

The Turkish Islamic Milieu During the First Half of the 20th Century

The Islamic milieu in Turkey went through serious convulsions in the first half of the 20th century. The 19th century had been dominated by controversies over reform and Westernization; by the early 1900s, the most potent intellectual forces in the Ottoman

Empire were those that sought to rebuild the empire on the basis of public legitimacy based on Turkish nationalism, Islam, or a combination of the two. By the early 1920s, World War I had led to the collapse of the empire and the creation of the Turkish republic; intellectually, this meant the dominance of the laicist Turkish nationalism of Kemal Atatürk. In turn, this led to the marginalization of Islamic intellectuals in the country. Aside from nursing the deep wounds of the loss of the empire and the abolition of the caliphate, Islamic thinkers were marginalized politically as well, and many were repressed as a result of the Jacobin policies of the 1930s. The end of World War II would bring about a slow but steady reversal of that trend, as the primacy of anti-communism led to a gradual rehabilitation of Islam, culminating in the long reign of the AKP half a century later.

Turkish Islamic thought in this period can thus be divided into two phases: what Ahmet Yıldız calls the “period of accommodation” from the 1870s to 1924, followed by the “withdrawal” from public space between 1924 and 1950. In the first phase, Islamic thought was overwhelmingly reformist and modernist: Its leading proponents sought to reconcile Islam with modernity and science; viewed the decline of the Ottoman Empire as a result of its backwardness compared to the West; and in the political realm, sought to reconcile Western constitutional and political institutions with Islamic history.⁴ In other words, Islamic thinkers followed the likes of Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and the Muslim Jadid movement of the Russian Empire, arguing for an embrace of modernity, science, and Western institutions, while adapting them to an Islamic context. This did not mean full Westernization or an embrace of secularism, but a willingness to learn from the strengths of the West for the salvation of the empire against those very Western forces. The main debates of the time regarded the emphasis to be put on Islam as opposed to Turkish nationalism as a form of identity, with various thinkers leaning in either direction. Yet, importantly, there was a near-consensus shared even by Turkish nationalists such as Ziya Gökalp on the crucial role of Islam for the national and state identity.

The creation of the republic would change matters. While Kemalism did accept the cultural identity of Islam as a key marker of Turkishness, it saw Islam’s dominant role in politics as having played an important role in hindering the modernization of the Ottoman Empire, and as a result it sought to reduce the role of religion in the identity of the nation and eliminate it from politics. This pushed Islamic thinkers to the margins, defined them as reactionary and backward, and repressed their efforts to influence public opinion or the state. Thus, the leading Islamic periodical *Sebilürreşad*, edited by Eşref Edip, was closed in 1925, and the editor temporarily moved to Egypt. Along with this, the government closed all *tariqah*, pushing the Sufi orders underground. By 1930, preacher training schools were closed.⁵

As a result, the Islamic intellectual elite of Istanbul were essentially marginalized and the cities secularized. However, “in the provinces, in the back stage, the old structures were maintained ... the embers seem to have contained more fire than could be observed.”⁶ This led to the rupture of the link between urban Islamic elites and the Muslims of the Anatolian countryside—in other words, cutting the periphery loose from the center.⁷ At this time, Islam was organized primarily around Sufi orders, most importantly the Naqshbandiya, discussed in detail below. Aside from the Naqshbandiya, other *tariqa* included the Mevlevi and Qadiri orders, as well as new movements such as the followers of Islamic modernist scholar Said Nursi and of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan.

It was mainly from the periphery that religious students went abroad—to Cairo, Damascus, or Baghdad—to study Islam. There, they met the ideas of global political Islam, primarily the works of Abu ala al-Mawdudi, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and, in particular, the works of Sayid Qutb. By the late 1960s, these works were translated into Turkish and formed a powerful influence on the Islamic movement in the multi-party era. By that time, not only had some of the Kemalist policies been relaxed, the Democrat Party had spent a decade in power rehabilitating Islam, and the 1961 constitution (imposed after the 1960 military coup) provided

for a considerable liberalization of the country's political climate. In parallel, the periphery now came to the center: Mass migration to the large cities and particularly Istanbul helped strengthen and revitalize the orders, lodges, and Islamic movements, especially in Istanbul.

The Cold War and the State's Turn to Islam

A facilitating factor in the rise of the Islamic movement was the Turkish state's gradual turn to Islam after the death of Kemal Atatürk in 1938. Since 1950, Turkey was ruled by center-right parties that were naturally Western-oriented, but which nonetheless simultaneously tolerated and sometimes even promoted Islamization. This seeming contradiction arose from the perceived need to counter the mounting threat of socialism and communism during the Cold War. In fact, as early as 1946, a parliamentarian of the ruling Republican People's Party (CHP)—former education minister Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver—presented a motion in Parliament calling for increasing the religious education, motivating the proposal with the need to “acquire a moral strength to withstand the threat of communism.”⁸ Two decades later, Justice Party (AP) parliamentarian Mehmet Ateşoğlu insisted that religious instruction was the best antidote to communism: “to give Turkish children a religious and national consciousness, to teach them to be Turkish and Islamic, is the way to ensure that leftism is neutralized.”⁹

Their Western orientation notwithstanding, Turkey's ruling parties from the 1950s onward embraced Islamic fraternities, accommodated their demands, and opened up the state apparatus for them. In fact, the formation of an Islamist party was triggered in part by economic interests; but many Islamic fraternities (the Gülen community most notably from the 1970s onward) contented themselves with operating within the state system and expanding their influence within the center-right parties. The decades after 1950 saw the uninterrupted expansion of Islamic *İmam-Hatip* preacher schools, and in particular of Quran courses provided by the State Directorate of Religious Affairs, the *Diyanet*.

Simultaneously, the cadres of the Islamic fraternities—especially the members of the Naqshbandiya (*Nakşibendis* in Turkish)—were welcomed to the state bureaucracy, where they soon became entrenched. For example, the State Planning Organization founded after the 1960 military coup was especially selected to serve as a central base for the Naqshbandiya offensive in the state bureaucracy.¹⁰ When Turgut Özal, a Naqshbandi, was appointed undersecretary of the State Planning Organization, the doors of the bureaucracy were flung wide open for the members of the order.¹¹

The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and the Iskenderpaşa Lodge

Sufi orders are known for their esoteric nature, in contrast to orthodox Islam. This has often implied an emphasis on the mystical experience at the expense of literalism, as well as at the expense of the strict following of the Shari'a. However, it would be a mistake to view the Naqshbandi order through this lens. Indeed, the order stands out among Sufi orders for its compatibility with orthodox, official Islam. Indeed, the Naqshbandiya differs from most Sufi orders, almost all of whom trace their *silsila*—their chain of spiritual transmission—back to Muhammad via his son-in-law Ali, who is the central figure in the Shi'a branch of Islam. By contrast, the Naqshbandiya is the only one to trace its chain of transmission through the first Sunni Caliph, Abu Bakr. This explains the order's firm allegiance to the orthodox Sunni tradition, and to the strict adherence to the Shari'a, with mysticism only being a “second story” on top of the fulfillment of formal Islamic duties.¹²

A central figure in the order's development is the 17th century Shaykh Ahmad al-Sirhindi, who reinforced the orthodoxy of the order and its opposition to Shi'ism, while strictly regulating the room for “ijtihād,” meaning “independent reasoning,” “within the bounds of the Quran and sunna.”¹³ Importantly, Sirhindi advocated an “activist Sufi practice that encouraged political and social life at the expense of older Sufi practices of withdrawal from public affairs.”¹⁴

In the 19th century, this thinking would be picked up by Khalid-i-

Baghdadi, an ethnic Kurd from northern Iraq, who was initiated into the Naqshbandiya in India in 1809. He developed a new branch of the order, known as the Khalidiya, which reinforced Sirhindi's ideas with a powerful rejection of foreign rule and non-Islamic ideas. This struck a powerful chord among Muslims subjected to European colonization from the North Caucasus to Indonesia, as well as an Ottoman Empire subjected to "capitulations," preferential treaties with European powers.

Soon, the Khalidi order began to eclipse other orders in prominence in the empire. The Khalidis became leading advocates for reform in the empire in the 1820s, with "the reinstatement of Islam as a guideline for reform," including "promotion of a stricter use of the Shari'a."¹⁵ Instead, the Western-oriented reforms of the Tanzimat period won the day, including the introduction of citizenship to non-Muslims and the adoption of Western legal codes. The Khalidi order became the main force of opposition to these reforms.¹⁶ In the republican era, the mantle was picked up by Mehmet Zahid Kotku (1897-1980), a son of migrants from Dagestan. Initiated into the Khalidi order in 1918, Kotku became the Shaykh of its Gümüşhanevi lodge in 1952 upon being posted as a preacher in Istanbul. He took over the Iskenderpaşa mosque in 1958, where he remained until his death.

In the three decades that followed, Kotku became the informal leader of Turkish political Islam, promoting the Khalidi doctrines in the new environment enabled by multi-party democracy. Kotku was influenced by anti-colonialist thinking, urging his disciples to remove Turkey from "economic slavery" to foreigners, and thus develop industry in Turkey itself. He supported the acquisition of modern science and technology as much as he opposed the cultural values of the West, arguing that by imitating the West, Turks had "lost the core of [their] identity." Finally, he believed Muslims "should try to capture the higher summits of social and political institutions and establish control over society," including the formation of media outlets, such as the daily *Sabah* in 1968.¹⁷ In the bureaucracy, as noted, Kotku's followers were particularly

successful in establishing a presence within the State Planning Organization, from where they developed influence on economic and social policies and municipal personnel.¹⁸

It is difficult to overstate the role of Kotku and the Iskenderpaşa lodge. Kotku directly encouraged a generation of pious Muslims to take positions in the state bureaucracy, starting the process of infiltration and takeover of state institutions that would help political Islam dominate Turkey. As Birol Yeşilada has observed, "the Naksibendis always emphasized the need to conquer the state from within by aligning themselves with powerful sources of capital and political actors."¹⁹

But, toward the end of his life, Kotku also set in motion the rise of a new current in Turkish Islamism that would move away from the Naksibendi approach to politics—of working within the system, of rising within the bureaucracy, of attaching oneself to the existing political establishment—in favor of creating an Islamist political force bent on capturing the system from the outside and remolding it in a theological cast. A large number of Kotku disciples and Iskenderpaşa members attained prominent political positions, including leaders of the center-right, like President Turgut Özal and his more orthodox brother Korkut Özal. But it was Necmettin Erbakan, who was a fixture on Turkey's political scene for three decades, who was to have the biggest impact on the direction of political Islamism in the country. Kotku's fateful decision to bless Erbakan's creation of an Islamist political party laid the groundwork for the emergence of a new strain of Islamist thinking that would eventually eclipse the Naqshbandiya, give rise to the AKP, and propel Iskenderpaşa lodge members—including Erdoğan, his Interior Ministers Abdülkadir Aksu and Beşir Atalay, as well as close to a dozen other ministers during Erdoğan's tenure—to the commanding heights of the Turkish state.²⁰

As discussed below, with Erbakan's emergence on the political scene, he appropriated leadership of political Islam for himself rather than deferring to the Iskenderpaşa leadership. Following Kotku's death, leadership of the community passed to his son-

in-law, Professor Esat Coşan. Coşan developed further distance from Erbakan, and for all practical purposes, severed the organic link between his lodge and Erbakan's politics. The lodge itself subsequently declined in influence; Coşan left Turkey for Australia following the 1997 military intervention, where he died in a car accident in 2001. He was succeeded as Sheykh by his son, Nurettin Coşan, who remains in Australia. While the religious leadership of the lodge is a thing of the past, the role it has played in Turkish politics—steeping Erbakan and the core of the leadership of the AKP in Islamist ideology and birthing their transformation into a political force—has strong ramifications for Turkey today.

Turkish Islamism Goes Political: The Rise of Erbakan and Milli Görüş

The *Milli Görüş* movement came to embody political Islam in Turkey for close to two generations. However, the movement remains relatively poorly understood. It emerged in the mid-1960s, when a group of Islamic-rooted intellectuals and members of Parliament within the ruling Justice Party (AP) became alienated from the party's modern and secular elite. Until the late 1950s, the Islamists close to the Naqshbandi order remained under the influence of Kotku's predecessor, Abdulaziz Bekkine, who had once said that "Islam and the Muslim community must be kept outside and above politics. Keeping religion out of politics keeps it alive; involving religion in politics destroys it. Islam has never and should never be politicized."²¹

Dissatisfied with this approach, the younger group of Islamists grew increasingly restless during the mid-1960s and began meeting and organizing themselves. By the second half of the decade, the Islamist wing had become a reality within the center-right, including within the Justice Party. As will be seen, this group was ready to split from the AP when the time was ripe. Necmettin Erbakan provided the decisive moment in 1969, and Kotku the theological blessing, for the establishment of an independent Islamist political force: the National Order Party (MNP).

The MNP's ideological counterpart was the *Milli Görüş* movement, which was built on the ideological foundations of the Naqshbandi order, adding to its anti-Western views anti-Semitic, pan-Islamic, and totalitarian strands it drew from global trends in political Islam in the 1960s and 1970s—particularly the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

The "Hoca": The Role of Necmettin Erbakan

Necmettin Erbakan, as the founder of Turkey's first Islamist political party and fixture on the political scene for three decades, is a critical figure in the emergence of Turkish political Islam—so much so that he became universally known as the "hoca," meaning "teacher." He ushered in the first evolution in the Islamists' political approach—from working within the structures of the bureaucracy and existing political parties to uniting different economic classes into a viable Islamist political party of their own—while building on the Naqshbandi order's beliefs to develop a new ideological movement: the *Milli Görüş*.

Erbakan was born into a religious family in Sinop in 1926. After studies at Istanbul Technical University, Erbakan pursued a Ph.D. at the Aachen Technical University and, while in Germany, worked as an engineer on the development of the Leopard tanks. Returning to Turkey, Erbakan helped found Gümüş motor in 1956, the first factory producing engines in Turkey, controlled by the Iskenderpaşa lodge. Nevertheless, he sought a political career. Leveraging his industrial background, Erbakan chose the chairmanship of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) as his first political objective, running for the post in 1968.

TOBB organized the businesses of Turkey and had a semi-official status. The organization played a central role because it held decisive power over the distribution of import quotas and over the allotment of foreign currency to corporations. As a result, TOBB was the scene of clashes between different business factions. The principal fault line ran between urban-based big business and small- and medium-scaled businesses in rural areas.

Erbakan's election to head TOBB brought the conflict between these two factions into the open. Fearing that Erbakan would privilege the interests of small-scale, religious businessmen from the provinces rather than Istanbul's secular business elite, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, Erbakan's former university classmate, canceled the election and ordered police to evict Erbakan from his office. Undeterred, Erbakan applied for membership in Demirel's center-right Justice Party in 1969, but was vetoed by Demirel. As Erbakan's colleague, Hasan Aksay, relates, this was only a ruse: The Islamists knew Demirel would veto Erbakan, and that would relieve Erbakan from the stigma of having broken away from the party.²²

It was this episode that launched a new approach to politics by Turkey's Islamists and set Erbakan on the path to the influential role he was to play in the country's history. Turned away by the AP, Erbakan decided to contest the 1969 parliamentary election as an independent candidate from the province of Konya, a conservative stronghold in Anatolia. Succeeding in gaining a seat in Parliament and seeing that he had found a constituency in search of representation, Erbakan decided to build his own political party.

Diverging from his predecessor, Bekkine, Kotku formally sanctioned the Islamic forces' creation of a separate political organization, giving Erbakan his blessing to form the National Order Party in 1969. Indeed, a leading Islamist of the time relates that Kotku told Erbakan that "the country has fallen into the hands of Freemasons imitating the West ... for the government to fall into the hands of its true representatives within the boundaries of laws, forming a political party is an inevitable historical duty for us. Be part of this enterprise and lead it."²³

The Ideology of *Milli Görüş*

Despite being sanctioned by Kotku and emerging from the Naqshbandi order, the *Milli Görüş* movement was shaped by several additional sources of inspiration that should be investigated. Erbakan's personality and worldview is an obvious

case, given his towering role over Turkish political Islam. Second, while Turkish political Islam does not have an equivalent to Hassan al-Banna or Said Qutb, there are several ideological inspirations that are widely known to have influenced not only *Milli Görüş* but Erdoğan and the current generation of Turkish leaders—both domestic and foreign.

Erbakan's Beliefs and Ideology

The views underlying Erbakan's long political career have been remarkably consistent. At its base lies a recognition of the backwardness of Turkey and the Islamic world, as well as an urge to build a powerful, industrialized Turkey that serves as the natural leader of the Muslim world. Erbakan and his *Milli Görüş* movement accepted science and technology but vigorously opposed all other imports from the West, particularly in the cultural sphere. Importantly, Erbakan also viewed global political and economic relations from an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist perspective, believing that Turkey and the Islamic world were being exploited by the West. While Turkey needed to build its own heavy industrial base, the Western countries prevented this at every step. Instead of seeking alliance with the West, Erbakan believed, Turkey should form its own Islamic union where it would be a natural leader.

Erbakan's political philosophy is readily available in a remarkable book, *Davam* (My Cause), which was attributed to Erbakan but published posthumously and edited by Mustafa Yılmaz, Ankara bureau chief of the *Milli Görüş* newspaper *Milli Gazete*. Given the contents of the book, it merits a substantial discussion. Indeed, the book provides a window into exactly how radical and extreme the views of *Milli Görüş* are and how the worldview of its followers is distorted by wild conspiracy theories.²⁴ The 10-chapter book begins with a chapter on "Creation and Humans," followed by "Our Islamic Cause" and "The Forces that Run the World." Subsequent chapters discuss Islamic union, Cyprus, and industrialization and culture, and they are interesting in their own right; but, these first chapters are the most significant window into the thinking of Erbakan.

The chapter on “our Islamic cause” is, unsurprisingly, a passionate argument for Islam as an all-encompassing guide to individual and social conduct. It begins by rejecting any source of justice or truth aside from Islam and asserts that nothing good can come out of any science or technology that does not take its inspiration from the Quran (Erbakan then contradicts himself by citing the famous Quranic verse urging people to seek knowledge even if they have to go to China, since, obviously, knowledge from China does not take its inspiration from the Quran). Further, Islam is the salvation of all mankind and, therefore, every human being, whether Muslim or not, must accept the leadership of Muhammad. Alleging that at least 60 to 70 percent of human knowledge was produced by Muslims, Erbakan denigrates Western science for its reliance on reason and rejection of revelation.

He further savages Western “arrogant and imitator” scholars for failing to admit that much of what they produced builds on what they took from Muslims. Indeed, he writes, the European languages were so poor that Westerners did not understand the knowledge taken from Muslims in the 14th century until the 18th century. As a result, Erbakan argues, Muslims are awed by the knowledge in Western books they read, unaware that “those principles were taken by reading books written by Muslims.”²⁵ Somewhat amusingly, Erbakan takes the mathematical constant pi as an example, claiming that “a Muslim” (Jamshid al-Kashi) rather than the Greeks discovered this number accurately—omitting the fact that al-Kashi was one in a long line after Chinese, Indian, and Italian and before French, Flemish, and Austrian scientists that perfected the calculation of the number. Similarly, he credits Muslims for discovering the decimal numeral system, omitting reference to Chinese discoveries half a millennium earlier. And in discussing Christopher Columbus’s discovery of America, he relates how Columbus calmed a near-mutiny on his ship by telling his crew that he knew from Muslim scholars’ books that there is land in the West, and “Muslim scholars never lie.”²⁶

There are many similar examples, but Erbakan’s analysis stands

out in several ways: first, for what can either be his ignorance or willful deception concerning the history of ideas; second, when discussing other civilizations, he mentions their ethnic or national identity—Indians and Chinese, not Hindus or Confucians/Buddhists. Yet when speaking of Arab, Persian, or Turkish historical figures, he systematically defines them as Muslims by their religious rather than ethnic or national identity.

Erbakan then spends several pages explaining how women’s true happiness can lie only in Islam because the West “burdens women with responsibilities and burdens unfitting for her disposition,” while Islam assigns her “duties suitable for her creation.”²⁷

That chapter could be overlooked as prejudiced and misguided but based on a perhaps understandable resentment of the West. However, the next chapter, “The Forces that Govern the World” is more remarkable and chilling. In summary, it makes the argument that the Jews have spent five thousand years trying to control the world and that the Torah is falsified from beginning to end. Jews don’t worship God but themselves, Erbakan wrote, and Judaism is not a religion but an ideology created by fanatical Rabbis based on arrogant racism. The Jews have made control over the world into a central element of their ideology. Freemasonry is a product of Kabbalism, and only three Kabbalists in Jerusalem know all the secrets of the conspiracy. The highest body in this world organization is the Sanhedrin, a 70-member council of rabbis—here, Erbakan refers to a body existing in ancient Judea but abolished in 358 A.D. Under that body is the “Sworn council” of 70, which includes the Rockefeller, Rothschild, and Agnelli families and is organized in every country of the world. They control all major countries of the world, their politics, media, and think tanks—amounting to a secret world state run by Zionism.

To control the world, Erbakan claims, the Zionists created a number of organizations. These include formal ones such as the United Nations, but equally important are the informal groupings, particularly the Bilderberg group, “created by a group of Jews in 1954” in order to “plan world politics and economics for Zionist

profit.”²⁸ He correctly attributes the foundation of Bilderberg to Jozef Retinger—but terms Retinger both a “Jewish cleric” and a grand master of Swedish Freemasonry. But far from being Jewish, Retinger in his youth contemplated becoming a Catholic priest; and Swedish Freemasonry, unlike most other Masonic orders, requires members to be Christian, making Erbakan’s claims incongruent. Moreover, he claims the “Jewish” Rockefeller family finances the Bilderberg group—whereas Rockefeller was a Baptist.

To advance the Zionist aim of a world union under Jewish control, Erbakan wrote, the Bilderberg group created the European Union, as well as the Trilateral Commission bringing together the U.S., Europe, and Japan. Similarly, the U.S. State Department is a “showpiece organization.” In fact, America’s true foreign ministry is the Council on Foreign Relations, run by 37 permanent members, of which 10 are Jews and the remainder are high-level Freemasons.

In the past four centuries, Erbakan claims, Jews have exploited the riches of Asia, America, and Africa. The Zionists control world capital through means ranging from forcing countries to economic crises and then lending their governments money at exorbitant interest rates, to taking 9 percent of all flight tickets through the International Air Transport Association or insuring all world shipping through Lloyds of London. Most of the decolonization movement in the third world was for show: Colonies became independent states, but the new rulers were Freemasons who further entrenched the dependence and colonization of their countries. For Zionists, Erbakan argues, dividing and breaking up other countries and forcing them into war with one another is not just politics, “it is a belief.”²⁹ For, Erbakan says, the Torah and Kabbala both note that Jews are the superior race, and other races developed from monkeys to serve the Bani Israel.³⁰

This is where the discussion comes closer to Turkey: The first step in Jewish world domination is for Jews in the diaspora to gather in Palestine, and then to form Greater Israel between the Nile and the Euphrates. Then, Zionists will rebuild the Temple of Solomon on the site of the Al-Aqsa mosque, in the belief that the Messiah will

arrive. For Israel’s security, therefore, there can be no independent Turkey. Indeed, Erbakan relates Theodor Herzl’s approach to Sultan Abdülhamit to buy land in Palestine. When rejected, Erbakan claims, the Zionists at the first world Zionist congress in 1897 decided to overthrow Abdülhamit, dissolve the Ottoman Empire, and within 100 years, dissolve Islam itself.³¹ To implement the plan, the Zionists created the Committee for Union and Progress, which completed the first task in 1909: sending Abdülhamit into exile. Then, Zionists forced the empire into World War I, ending in its dissolution with the Treaty of Sèvres, “fundamentally a project of Greater Israel.”³² While the Turkish war of independence reversed their plans, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne was introduced in order to create a state where the Turks would be alienated from their religion and all their institutions taken over by world Zionism. Thus, from that point onward, “collaborators” in Turkey have tried to join the EU to remove it from its own identity.

Apparent in Erbakan’s thinking is a delusional conspiracy mentality in which every force Turkey confronts is controlled by world Zionism and bent on the destruction of Turkey as a state, nation, and community. This worldview, to various extents, came to be firmly entrenched over several decades in the Turkish Islamic milieu. Unfortunately, variations of these conspiracy theories are not limited to Turkey’s Islamists. Whether on the left or on the right, among nationalists and Kemalists, similar conspiracy theories abound, whether or not they include the Jews in a prominent role or not. Many Kemalists, for example, continue to believe that the West seeks to destroy Turkey and that Western support for moderate Islam in Turkey is a vehicle to achieve that goal.

However, Erbakan’s worldview is of a different nature and particularly dangerous because it is based on a purported millenarian conspiracy into which every event in world politics can easily be fitted. Moreover, in this worldview and its ensuing ideology, anti-Semitism is not an occasional feature; it is a central tenet, a pillar of *Milli Görüş* thought, from which its political and economic agendas cannot be separated. Not staying at that, it

implicitly or explicitly defines all domestic enemies of political Islam as collaborators with Zionism, and therefore, as traitors to the nation. Finally, it is based on the dehumanization of the Jews, a worldview that clearly is not Turkish in origin but has more in common with the European anti-Semitism of the 1930s. As will be seen below, this is not an accident.

Foreign Inspirations: Milli Görüş and the Muslim Brotherhood

The emergence of political Islam on the Turkish scene was not an isolated phenomenon. In fact, it was part and parcel of the global emergence of political Islam. And it was far from isolated from these global trends. Quite to the contrary, the influence of foreign Islamic political thinkers on Erbakan and the *Milli Görüş* has been noted in passing by a number of scholars.

Jenny White noted that Erbakan's parties "were influenced by ... Islamist writers like Mawdudi, Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, whose works were translated into Turkish in the 1970s."³³ Similarly, Philip Robins, in an article on Turkish foreign policy under Erbakan, observed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's hostility to Erbakan as a result of "Erbakan's cordial ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, developed over a long period."³⁴ Studying Islamism in Europe, Udo Ulfkotte and Lorenzo Vidino both detail the intricate links in Germany between the Brotherhood and *Milli Görüş*, including intermarriage between the Erbakan family and Brotherhood leader Ibrahim Al-Zayat, as well as close practical cooperation that has provided the Brotherhood and *Milli Görüş* with a dominant role in German Islamic organizations.³⁵

In the same vein, Zeyno Baran argues that from the 1960s, "Erbakan emerged as a crucial conduit of the Muslim Brotherhood into Turkey ... Erbakan was heavily inspired by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, particularly Qutb's call for the rural intelligentsia to organize itself and gradually gain control of the government from the urban elite."³⁶ French scholar Olivier Carré refers to Erbakan as "Qutbist."³⁷ Ahmet Yıldız discusses the matter at some length, noting that "[Turkish] Islamic thought discovered the Muslim

thought at large via the intensive efforts of translation from such leading Islamist figures as Mawdudi in Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt." Thus, he argues:

"Turkish Islamic thought became more universally oriented despite its inward-oriented nationalist-local leanings ... under the impact of an ummah-based perspective triggered by the translated Islamic literature and catalyzed by the Kurdish Islamists. ... The Islamic movements in Egypt, Pakistan, and later, Iran and the works of Hassan Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Mawdudi, and Ali Shariati were particularly influential in shaping Turkish Islamic thought towards a more universal conception of Islam, and thus the understanding that Islam is not something limited to personal life but also has public claims, took root in the Turkish form of Islamism."³⁸

Sociologist Nilüfer Göle noted the relationship with urbanization: "recent migrants to the cities encounter the works of contemporary Islamist thinkers, such as ... Mawdudi ... Qutb ... Shari'ati, and the Turkish Ali Bulaç and Ismet Özel, who redefine Islamic authenticity without being apologetic to Western modernity."³⁹

Yet aside from the mentions in passing, the connection between *Milli Görüş* and other Islamic movements has not been the subject of serious study, whether in organizational or ideological terms. Indeed, while much has been written on Erbakan and his movement, these studies have tended to focus on its sociological and political aspects rather than on the roots of its ideology or its international relations. One exception is a 2011 study by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, which details the close historical connections of both Erbakan and Erdoğan to the Muslim Brotherhood, including the latter's relationship with the World Assembly of Muslim Youth going back to the 1970s.⁴⁰ Even in Turkish, few sources dwell at length over the connection between the Brotherhood and *Milli Görüş*. One exception is Soner Yalçın's *Milli Nizam'dan Fazilet'e Hangi Erbakan*, which discusses the close personal connections between Erbakan's parties and the movement, noting the presence of leading Brotherhood figures at

the Welfare Party's conventions in the 1990s.⁴¹

This is a lacuna that this study does not aspire to fill, and which requires considerable research. Yet conversations with *Milli Görüş* representatives confirm the broad outlines of a close intellectual and practical relationship. In these conversations, a striking element is that individuals with an AKP connection that are involved in current politics (including a former assistant to Erdogan) disingenuously reject any notion of a connection to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yet individuals that have no connection to the AKP are forthright about the influence coming from abroad. When asked in general terms about inspirations of the movement, a senior *Milli Gazete* editor volunteered that the movement's global partner is the Muslim Brotherhood. From the late 1960s, he argues, they were most influenced by Qutb, Banna, and Mawdudi, as well as Ali Shariati. During his entire career, the editor continued, Erdogan was in constant contact with the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, from the stories of foreign travel across the Middle East and North Africa, a picture emerges of a leader that was a senior figure in international Islamic politics. Indeed, attendees at Erdogan's 2011 funeral reads like a "who's who" of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement, including Hamas leader Khaled Meshal and the Brotherhood's former spiritual guide Mohamed Mahdi Akef.⁴² But it was the Tunisian Islamist leader Rashid al-Ghannouchi who described Erdogan's role best: Referring to Erdogan as "a big brother," he stated that "in the Arab world in my generation, when people talked about the Islamic movement, they talked about Erdogan ... it is comparable to the way they talked about Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb."⁴³

While Erdogan and the parties of the *Milli Görüş* were not an integral part of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Brotherhood certainly considered it something akin to the Turkish version of the Brotherhood, much in the same way that it viewed the Jamaat-i Islami of Pakistan. This link, and the role of the Brotherhood's roster of thinkers on the movement, helps explain one source of the

movement's radicalism and anti-Semitism. Indeed, it was Sayyid Qutb who wrote *Ma'rakatuna ma'a al-Yahud*, "Our struggle with the Jews."⁴⁴ As subsequent authors including Mattias Küntzel and Bassam Tibi have detailed, Qutb was a key figure in the emergence of Islamic anti-Semitism, marrying the traditional condescension towards Jews in Muslim societies with the conspiratorial and genocidal anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany.⁴⁵ Indeed, as Küntzel writes, "in Qutb's fantasyland, not only is everything Jewish evil, but everything evil is Jewish." Though there were other Turkish inspirations for Erdogan's anti-Semitism, this statement is remarkably fitting for Erdogan's worldview, and it is clear that his anti-Semitism as well as his anti-Western ideology was influenced considerably by Qutb's writings.

Turkish Inspirations: Modern Islamist Intellectuals

Having noted the close relations between *Milli Görüş* and the Muslim Brotherhood, it is also important to stress the differences. First, while Mawdudi and Qutb strive for a pure Islam and vehemently denounce Sufism, Turkish political Islam is closely connected to a Sufi order, albeit the most orthodox among them, the Naqshbandiya. And while both Pakistan's Jamaat-i Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood have been supporters of violence, Turkish political Islam has never crossed that line. Indeed, whenever Erdogan's parties were closed down and his government removed from power, he and his followers never responded by force, but passively accepted what they considered a repressive and unjust state action against them.

This, in turn, relates less to the Naqshbandi connection—after all, the Naqshbandi have not been particularly pacific, forming the nucleus of armed resistance to alien rule in numerous other countries. However, it has more to do with the Ottoman legacy and the hegemony of Hanafi Islam in Turkey. The former has carried with it a sanctification of the state that has served as a powerful disincentive to violence: The state was not to be fought, but to be taken over peacefully. The latter, Hanafi jurisprudence, is also heavily restrictive as regards the permissiveness of violence. It

postulates that after the acceptance of Islam, a government and society can never be considered infidel, and thus, it prohibits the use of violence to overthrow the regime in a Muslim country. Violent revolts, in this jurisprudence, are considered fitna, or sedition. Instead, the Hanafi school teaches patience and restraint. As one scholar has noted:

“The Hanefi approach is to avoid armed struggle against an unjust power, because it would probably lead to the discredit and hindrance of Islam as well as suffering by the population. This attitude is one of the main characteristics of mainstream Turkish Islamism that distinguishes it from some wings of Arab Islamism. Violence is disregarded as a political tool and opposition must be done in a more subtle form.”⁴⁶

This section will illustrate the domestic intellectual influences by discussing several Turkish Islamic scholars that have been important in the evolution of *Milli Görüş* as well as the AKP.

Necip Fazıl Kısakürek is considered a key forefather of both the extreme nationalist and Islamist forces in Turkey. As Toni Alaranta has observed, “President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan especially admires Kısakürek, often reciting his poems in public.”⁴⁷ Kısakürek stands out as he was the first intellectual in the republican era to develop a coherent Islamist political ideology, which he termed *Büyük Doğu* or “Great East.” As one scholar has noted, his was “the first case of ‘repoliticization of Islam’ which called for the foundation of an Islamic state, though indirectly, in the republican Turkey.”⁴⁸

Kısakürek was exposed to the West during a year of studies in Paris, but much like Sayyid Qutb a few years later, his stay in the West did not impress him. While accepting the material achievements of the West, he despised the West in ways typical for Islamists, mainly for its emphasis on reason and progress at the expense of the spiritual.⁴⁹ In the mid-1930s, Kısakürek was deeply influenced by the Kurdish Khalidi Naqshbandi Shaykh Abdulkhakim Arvasi, whom he considered his spiritual master.⁵⁰ Kısakürek not only came to passionately reject the reforms of the Turkish

republic, which he termed “civilizational conversion,” he went even further—denouncing the entire period of reforms dating back to the Tanzimat in the 1830s as the work of “imitative false heroes’ who ‘lost the East but could not find the West.’”⁵¹ This decline had led to snowballing decline, and he saw the republic as “the last stage of decline.” Instead, again in a sense in parallel with Qutb (whose writings had not yet been translated into Turkish), Kısakürek saw the salvation in a pure and unadulterated Islam—with the main difference being Kısakürek’s endorsement of Naqshbandi Sufism as the “inner” form of Islam in harmony with the “outer,” Shari’a, whereas Qutb remained unflinchingly hostile to any Sufi mysticism.

Kısakürek’s writings clearly pointed to the need for an Islamic state, and furthermore, to Turkish leadership of the “Great East,” a pan-Islamic union with a Great Islamic Shura at Medina.⁵² While Kısakürek aspired to import only positive aspects of European thought, he clearly played a central role in channeling into Turkey one of Europe’s darkest traits: anti-Semitism.⁵³ He viewed the Jews as “the corrupting element within Western civilization,” and “held them responsible for the early conflicts among Muslims, the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the imitative modernization movement of Turkey and the abolition of the Caliphate,” the latter supposedly a political condition put by the West for the international recognition of the Turkish republic.⁵⁴ Needless to say, Jews were to be expelled from Turkey. As two Turkish analysts observe, this contrasted sharply with late Ottoman-era Islamists, who harbored no anti-Semitic views.⁵⁵

Nurettin Topçu was another influential “shaper” of Turkish Islamism, and particularly important as the originator of the idea of a Turkish-Islamic synthesis, which would be adopted by the military junta in the early 1980s. Topçu, too, was a follower of a Naqshbandi Khalidi Shaykh, Abdülaziz Bekkine, Kotku’s predecessor as the leader of the Iskenderpaşa lodge. He also studied in Paris, but unlike Kısakürek, he completed a Ph.D. in philosophy at the Sorbonne. He rejected the secular and modernist nature of

the Kemalist republic and also supported a third way between capitalism and communism. Yet he differed in supporting a much more “Turkish” Islam, rooted in “Anatolian romanticism” rather than an idealized, pure Islam. Thus, Topçu proclaimed that “the union of Islam and Turks led to the perhaps greatest marvel of history.”⁵⁶ As such, he did not particularly care for the Shari’a. Moreover, he was less critical of the West, being appreciative of Western religion and morality, but highly critical of the mechanization and industrialization of the West.

Like other Turkish Islamic thinkers, he viewed the Islamic world and particularly Turkey to be morally superior and saw the solution in a revival of a Turkish nationalism with Islam being its central identity marker, as opposed to Kemalism’s attempts to join the West. Highly critical of democracy, Topçu advocated a “Muslim Anatolian socialism,” a notion that put him in direct conflict with Kısakürek.⁵⁷ As Michelangelo Guida puts it, Topçu “has a vision of a society with limited freedoms and an authoritarian state as well as he imposes a religio-nationalism constructed on Turkishness that disregards the cultural and ethnic plurality of the country.”⁵⁸ But he was, like Kısakürek, a committed anti-Semite, something one scholar concludes he “acquired from inter-war France ... French debates and ideas furnished to the young Nurettin Topçu the necessary lexicon to express sentiments of resentment among intellectuals after the Ottoman bankruptcy: anti-capitalism and anti-Semitism.”⁵⁹ This obsession with the Jews became progressively worse until, after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Topçu came to view the Jews as “the ultimate enemies of truth and all humanity.”⁶⁰

The Legacy of *Milli Görüş*

In a comparative perspective, the *Milli Görüş* movement is both mainstream and unique. Its views of the West, Jews, and the state are similar to most other traditions of political Islam. The differences lie in the movement’s decidedly nonviolent nature and embrace of the state, and its strong attachment to Sufism of the Naqshbandi variety. While this explains the virtual absence

of Salafi/Wahhabi tendencies in Turkey, it does not mean that the movement is moderate. Quite to the contrary, the movement has from the outset been saturated in a worldview in which abhorrence of the West, Jews, and constitutional democracy are central tenets. Political realities in Turkey—pressure from the republican establishment, economic interests, and the need to win elections—have pushed some of these elements under the surface. But there can be no doubt that the formation of politicians in the *Milli Görüş* tradition is deeply antagonistic to the notion of a Western and democratic Turkey.

The three basic intellectual foundations of the movement are the traditions and related intellectual offshoots of the Khalidi Naqshbandi order; Ottoman nostalgia and an ensuing sense of Turkish superiority; and the influence of the global Islamic movement, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. Over time, however, the balance between these respective factors has not been static. In particular, the role of the Naqshbandi order has gradually receded: the order’s influence in society has declined precipitously, while important leaders have distanced themselves from the political parties of the *Milli Görüş* tradition, going so far as to endorse a non-Islamist party.

This development began before the death of Zahid Kotku but accelerated thereafter, in parallel with the rising stature of Necmettin Erbakan as an Islamic political leader in his own right, both in Turkey and regionally. No domestic intellectual force has come close to replacing the order’s role. In this regard, it appears that the role of the movement’s international connections, particularly its partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood, has come to exert an ever more important influence on the Turkish political Islamic movement.

Erbakan’s Career: Success and Failure

Necmettin Erbakan’s dominance over Turkish political Islam lasted for 30 years, from the creation of the National Order Party in 1969 to the closure of the Virtue Party in June 2001. Analysts

have attributed part of the movement's electoral success to its strong internal cohesion—one scholar terms the Welfare Party a “party with uncharacteristic cohesion and unity,” and lauds its “unique internal discipline and impressive organizational strengths,” noting that “it was not characterized by the frequent resignations and challenges to leadership and ideology that became endemic features of most of the other parties.”⁶¹ More than the cohesiveness of the his parties, however, Erbakan's successes came from being able to continually find, reach out to, and recruit new constituencies under the Islamist ideological banner of his party. This began with rural business interests, fear of which caused Demirel to oust Erbakan from TOBB and led through several iterations of Erbakan's economic policies as he subsequently sought to attract the working classes and then more globalized, Islamic “green” capital.

But while he was able to build Islamic political base, Erbakan was always a controversial leader. Indeed, his leadership of the political Islamic movement was far from inclusive. It was authoritarian and top-down, successively alienating important constituencies within the Islamic movement. Thus, in the 1970s Erbakan had already alienated the Nur and Kadiri orders, while Turkey's largest Islamic movement, the influential Fethullah Gülen community (an offshoot of the Nur movement), at all times maintained its distance from Erbakan's parties. In the 1990s, as noted, it even divorced from the Naqshbandi order from which it was sprung.

Building an Islamist Party: The National Order Party

The conflict between Demirel and Erbakan, which led to the latter's ouster from TOBB, was more than a conflict of personalities. It reflected the fact that Erbakan and Demirel represented two factions of the Turkish bourgeoisie whose cultural identity as well as material interests had come into conflict. TOBB played a central role in this rivalry because it decided the distribution of import quotas and the allotment of foreign currency to corporations, but there were also significant sociological and ideological cleavages at play.

The conflict was rooted to a significant extent in the demands of a class of businessmen who identified as Islamic. Small-scale businessmen in the provinces across Turkey, which tended to be more religious, had revolted against the Istanbul big businesses, which tended to be more secular and Western-oriented.⁶² Thus, these economic differences reinforced a deeper confrontation between Westernization and the indigenous Islamic culture—especially given the propensity of the Islamic conservatives to view the world in terms of a clash between Western imperialism (typically seen as controlled by world Zionism) and Islamic victims. Anatolian businessmen naturally reached for the Islamist worldview when they articulated their demands or sought to explain the conflict: It came to be clad in anti-imperialist, anti-Western language, with Demirel frequently depicted as a Freemason.⁶³

It was this emergence of an Islamist business class that Erbakan leveraged to build the support and constituency for his entry into politics. His 1969 parliamentary campaign was financed by businesses that saw Demirel's ouster of Erbakan from TOBB as a demonstration that the AP would not represent their interests⁶⁴ and who were prominent members of the Naqshbandi order.⁶⁵ And the platform that Erbakan developed for his National Order Party successfully mixed the anti-imperial Islamic ideology that he inherited from the Naqshbandis with the state-led industrialization economic program that most favored these Anatolian entrepreneurs. Erbakan exhorted the state to support the growth of small businesses by investing in the heavy industrialization of rural Anatolia, and he called for policies that would spread capital and break the concentration of economic power to the urban centers.⁶⁶

Incidentally, the same economic dynamic led Alparslan Türkeş to launch a similar challenge to the urban elites, but with the distinction that he sought to politicize Turkic ethnicity rather than religion.⁶⁷ Thus, it was the wedding of Anatolian small-scale business interests and the Naqshbandi movement that launched political Islam in Turkey to prominence, with Erbakan entering party

politics as their champion.

From National Salvation to the Welfare Party

Erbakan's first Islamist political experiment was short-lived, when the National Order Party was closed down by the 1971 military intervention only a year after its creation, but Erbakan was undeterred. The next year, he founded the National Salvation Party, which played a significant role in Turkish politics throughout the 1970s. The party received nearly 12 percent of the vote in 1973, joining Parliament as junior partner first with a left-wing government led by Bülent Ecevit, and then with successive right-wing coalitions from 1975 to 1979. He was banned from politics alongside all other leaders following the 1980 military coup, but returned to politics in 1987, rebuilding what then became the Welfare Party, which in 1995 became the largest party by a razor-thin margin thanks to the fragmentation of the center-right. Serving as prime minister in a coalition government from 1996 to 1997, his government nevertheless lost its parliamentary support following the February 28, 1997, military intervention, which led to the party's closure and Erbakan being banned from politics for life.

While the political parties controlled by Erbakan remained the main political representative of the Islamic Conservative movement in Turkey, the gradual evolution of its rhetoric and policies over time alienated Turkish political Islam from the religious brotherhoods from which it originated. Instead, it gradually came to be centered increasingly on the person of Erbakan and torn between the economic interests of its business base and the ideological inspiration coming mainly from abroad, especially the Arab world.

Erbakan's autocratic leadership style alienated his movement from the Naqshbandi Order from which it sprung, beginning as early as the 1970s. While Shaykh Kotku was the spiritual leader of the MSP, it originally was a coalition of three different orders: the Naqshbandi were the senior partner, but the movement also included the smaller Qadiri and Nur orders. But the early and mid-1970s were characterized by recurrent conflicts between members

of the three brotherhoods regarding the party's leadership and distribution of power. Already, in 1974, frustration with Erbakan had led to growing demands for diversification of the Naqshbandi-dominated party leadership council. It was at this point that Korkut Özal rose to prominence, long before his brother Turgut, who would go on to become president. Though a Naqshbandi and student of Kotku's, Özal was considered a conciliatory figure acceptable to the other brotherhoods.⁶⁸

However, Erbakan rejected any demands for change. This led to a split, with Nur and Qadiri representatives leaving the party ahead of the 1977 elections, the former going so far as to state that the MSP had nothing to do with Islam, being a vehicle for purely political purposes.⁶⁹ Partly as a result, the party obtained only 8.6 percent of the vote, halving its parliamentary representation. The Party was now dominated solely by the Naqshbandi wing, but this ideological cohesion did not prevent further struggles. At the 1978 party congress, Özal led a quiet rebellion against Erbakan's style of management, which Özal blamed for the party's poor electoral performance in 1977. In this conflict, where Özal proposed a different list of party administrators but was eventually overruled, he claimed to have received Kotku's blessing for his actions.⁷⁰

The 1980 military coup led to a hiatus in electoral politics, and the newly founded Welfare Party (RP) was unable to contest the 1983 elections. Erbakan was allowed back into politics only in 1987 and promptly took over the helm of the party. By this time, Kotku had died, being replaced by Coşan as the Shaykh of the Iskenderpaşa lodge. Erbakan clearly felt less inclined to defer to Coşan's leadership and once again asserted unequivocal control over the movement. But Erbakan had difficulties in leading RP to repeat the electoral successes of the 1970s. The RP received 7 percent of the vote in 1987, and in 1991 managed to clear the 10 percent threshold by making an electoral alliance with the Nationalist Party.

This was due, in part, to Erbakan's continued alienation of other Islamic fraternities, which abandoned RP for other center-right parties. In a May 1990 speech, Erbakan effectively claimed

leadership of the movement for himself. He referred to work for the Welfare Party as jihad, and established that “Muslims must submit themselves to the Party’s army,” while those who did not follow him were followers of the “religion of potatoes.” As Özdalga has observed, in so doing he “put himself and his party above the Naqshbandi order and its leader ... for [Coşan], taking political party activity as the only genuine Islamic practice bordered on blasphemy.”⁷¹ This prompted the break between Erbakan and the Iskenderpaşa lodge, and in the 1980s and early 1990s an important portion of the Islamist vote went to Turgut Özal’s Motherland Party (ANAP).

Turgut Özal had been a candidate for the MSP in the 1970s, but was more secular than his brother, Korkut, who brought a significant portion of the Iskenderpaşa followers into ANAP in the 1980s. ANAP, in a sense, formed a precedent for the future AKP’s early years in providing a big-tent party for the Turkish right, including nationalists, conservatives, liberals, and Islamists.

The Welfare Party also suffered from a break, following the 1980 coup, in the economic alliance between Erbakan and Islamic business interests. Prior to the coup, Erbakan tended above all to the interests of small businesses. But by the 1990s, these Islamic businessmen had become integrated in the global economy and no longer had any use for Erbakan’s archaic ideas of state-led heavy industrialization. Without the backing of these business interests—who now sought a “reformer” with a better appreciation for policies relevant to an era of globalization—RP’s supporters lacked the financial muscle to give the party a real electoral boost.⁷²

Only after Özal’s death in 1993, with ANAP moving in a liberal direction under Mesut Yılmaz, was the RP able to attain electoral successes, when most of the Islamist voters that had supported ANAP returned to the fold. At the same time, the RP reimagined its economic platform succeeding in simultaneously adapting to needs of an increasingly global Islamic business class while attracting, and becoming the dominant political force among, the growing urban working classes.

The RP’s growing success spoke of its ability to cater simultaneously to the Anatolian, conservative bourgeoisie and to the working class in the poor suburbs of the industrial metropolitan areas. French scholar Gilles Kepel points out that the alliance of religious bourgeoisies and working classes is a distinguishing feature of Islamist movements.⁷³ But while Kepel argues, unconvincingly, that these are alliances between equals, in Turkey it is more correct to speak of the Islamic bourgeoisie succeeding in *co-opting* the working class.⁷⁴

The Welfare Party benefited from this with a leftist-sounding rhetoric known as *Adil Düzen* or “just economic order,” which moved the Islamists into the old territory vacated by the left in the poor urban suburbs, the *varoşlar*. By 1991, the RP talked about the “exploitation” of labor, and called for a system in which the state set the wages and defended the right of labor to organize in trade unions. As İsmet Akça has observed, “the RP’s ideal of a ‘just economic order’ corresponded to a utopian picture of an egalitarian petit-bourgeois society.”⁷⁵ But this did not mean that there was anything remotely “leftist” about the Welfare Party.

Islamic business interests were pushing the Islamic movement toward a more liberal economic thinking, which embraced globalization and rejected populist rhetoric. Pressured by these factions, in 1994, the RP revised its “Just Order” program, deleting any hints of what could be interpreted as “leftism.” In its new wording, the program assured that the “Just Order” was business-friendly by restricting the prominent role that had been previously accorded the state in managing the economy and announcing that no strikes were going to take place in the “Just Order.”

Having to back away from the populist economic promises that first attracted the working classes, RP managed to secure continued worker support by promoting identity politics in lieu of class politics. This unification of labor and business found expression in an international agenda that catered to both economic and ideological agendas. The Islamic business organization MÜSİAD looked to the East and tended to see the East Asian economies as

a model as well as source of capital.⁷⁶ Thus, RP envisioned deeper ties to the Middle East, as well as with prospering Muslim nations like Malaysia and Indonesia, as a means to make Turkey's Islamic capital more competitive internationally and cater to the anti-Western, anti-imperialist sentiments of the Islamist base.⁷⁷ Erbakan also opposed EU membership and instead endorsed an Islamic Common Market as an alternative to Turkey's customs union with EU, which had been launched in 1995.

Erbakan in Power

In December 1995, Erbakan benefited from the division of the center-right and his unification of business and working class interests to emerge as Turkey's prime minister. With 21 percent of the vote, Welfare narrowly came out first, benefiting from divides within the center-right, as the two center-right parties received close to 20 percent each. Thus, whereas Islamism had the support of 21 percent of the population, the center-right still enjoyed first place with almost double that support. However, the two center-right parties proved unable to cooperate. Deep personal animosities between their leaders, Tansu Çiller and Mesut Yılmaz, made cooperation impossible, and attempts at a coalition between them rapidly failed. Instead, Erbakan succeeded in forming a coalition with Çiller and her True Path Party (DYP).

Once in power, Erbakan proved that the secularist fears had not been exaggerated. He soon turned most of his attention to promoting and financing Turkey's Islamic revival. During his tenure in power, he sought to strengthen the role of Islam in the state apparatus and in society. Since Welfare's victory in the 1994 municipal elections, there had been a systematic Islamization of local government institutions where it was in power. This process of *kadrolaşma*, or cadrelization, was similarly implemented in the ministries under RP control. Erbakan sought to accelerate the boom in *imam-hatip* schooling, which was already producing growing numbers of Islamist students in universities and graduates seeking government employment.

Domestic Policy

In early 1997, Erbakan ignited a debate concerning Shari'a, although this was in direct contradiction to the constitution. Erbakan argued that secularists made up 3 percent of the population and supported the introduction of Shari'a. While this led to large-scale protests by left-wing and women's groups, neither Yılmaz nor Çiller, who both depended on the votes of conservative parts of Turkey's population, took a stand. The former argued that "one could not protest against Islam," and the latter vaguely agreed that Muslims should follow the Shari'a.

By February 1997, a large pro-Shari'a demonstration took place in the Ankara suburb of Sincan, where the local RP mayor strongly endorsed Shari'a, ardently supported by the Iranian ambassador to Turkey. Meanwhile, anti-Shari'a demonstrations were harshly suppressed by the police, and leaks showed police had been instructed to deal harshly with demonstrations directed either at Islam or the government. In short, the Erbakan-led government had begun displaying an unexpected level of Islamic radicalism and authoritarian inclinations, and the nominally secularist coalition partners appeared unwilling to rein him in.⁷⁸

Foreign Policy

Erbakan also pursued a foreign policy that sought to distance Turkey from the "imperialist" West and play to the interests of his Islamic business backers.⁷⁹ Because he did not control Turkish foreign policy—the DYP and the secularist establishment did—Erbakan failed to implement most of his revisionist goals during his brief tenure in power.⁸⁰ But the moves that he did make in foreign policy were congruent with his ideological profile. Erbakan ran a shadow foreign relations operation from his office. Erbakan never traveled to a Western country as prime minister. Instead, his two foreign trips visited only Muslim countries. His symbolically important first foreign destination was Iran, on a trip that also included Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. A second trip took him to Egypt, Libya, and Nigeria. The major foreign policy

initiative of his premiership was the establishment of the D-8, a group of eight sizable and developing Muslim-majority nations. In Erbakan's vision, the D-8 would negotiate a new world order with the G-7 at a Yalta-style conference. In this sense, Erbakan did not directly undermine Turkey's Western direction, but he focused on establishing an Islamic vector.⁸¹

The 1997 Coup: Erbakan's Ouster and Its Reverberations

In the space of a year, even with his limited power, Erbakan managed to rile the pillars of Turkey's secular establishment: big business, civil society, and the military, as well as considerable section of Turkish society.

From the perspective of secular, pro-Western TÜSİAD, "green capital," a term that became widely used during the mid-1990s to describe Islamic businesses, was a threat both in terms of economic rivalry and, perhaps even more importantly, because its Asian orientation was seen as potentially challenging the framework that Turkish big business operated within, with close ties to American and European capital.⁸²

But there were other sources of dissension as well. Among civil society, a movement emerged called "a minute of darkness for eternal light," which saw opponents of Islamic rule switching off their lights at 9 p.m. precisely, darkening large areas of Turkey's cities every night. This movement had strong popular support, but the steps taken by the military and judiciary were more decisive.

The military leadership had used its representation in the National Security Council to complain of growing Islamization since late 1996. In February, after sending a detachment of tanks through Sincan as a sign of determination, the top brass used a nine-hour meeting of the NSC on February 28 to hand the government a list of 20 items on which it demanded a course correction. Demands included the extension of mandatory schooling from five to eight years, the end to *kadrolaşma* policies, safeguarding the independence of the judiciary, and growing accountability of political parties to actions of their members.

The NSC meeting started what is now commonly referred to as the February 28 process, or the postmodern coup. Erbakan at first tried to ignore the military's diktat, but by late May, a state prosecutor had indicted the RP on accusations of undermining secularism, seeking its closure. Meanwhile, DYP parliamentarians were being lobbied to resign, and a new party, the Democratic Turkey Party was set up to absorb the new independent deputies. This gradually shrank the government's parliamentary majority, ensuring it would fall. Erbakan threw in the towel and resigned.

The Islamists' brief tenure in power is now mainly remembered because it was forced from office by the military. But while the military was an influential force, it was far from the only reason Erbakan failed. What is now often ignored is the unprecedented radicalism of the Welfare Party while in power. Staffing the bureaucracy with Islamists, talking about Shari'a, and intimidating its opponents, Erbakan and the RP showed the thuggish nature of their party. Their defeat was in great part a result of their overreach and left a bitter aftertaste among the Turkish electorate.

The postmodern coup in 1997, followed by the Asian financial crisis in 1998 and the effects of Turkey's customs union with EU from 1995, worked in combination to alter the worldview of the Islamic elites. In the wake of the postmodern coup, being identified as "green capital" became costly. For example, the Ülker group, which had been known to be one of the major groups of Islamic capital, donated vast sums of money to secular organizations in order to disprove the allegations of being Islamic.⁸³

Meanwhile, the Asian financial crisis in 1998 opened the eyes of Islamic business to the realization that there were no other alternatives to the West as a source of capital besides Saudi and Gulf capital, which had been immensely important for their growth since the 1980s and which remained an indispensable source.⁸⁴ The viability of the East Asian economic model was called into question, and MÜSİAD companies that had invested in business networks in East Asia and looked on it as a promising market as well as a source of capital had to revise their strategies when the

markets contracted and potential sources of capital dried out. They then reoriented to Western markets.⁸⁵ These markets, and in particular the EU, also became increasingly important for Islamic businesses the more the positive effects of the customs union with the EU were felt.

In sum, Erbakan's courting of the small businesses and working class was a political innovation that gave the Islamists their first shot at power in 1995. But it also revealed that that base alone was not enough to get power, that a blatantly Islamist political agenda would not be tolerated by broad segments of Turkish state and society, and that the Islamist movement needed to find a way to eliminate its opponents within the state establishment once they got into power. This historic moment—working three decades to ascend to the pinnacle of power only to have it come crashing down in a year—made a significant impact on the younger generation of Turkish Islamists. The AKP's rebranding of political Islam learned from these mistakes and developed new tactics for not repeating them.

From Milli Görüş to AKP: Rebranding Political Islamism

The rebranding of the Islamic movement in 2000 and the creation of the AKP should be seen against the background of the many gradual changes taking place in the Islamic movement. In many ways, it constituted the culmination of this evolution and adaptation.

The Islamic Intelligentsia's Reaction to 1997

The shock of Erbakan's ouster led Islamist intellectuals to reexamine their ideological approach to politics and prompted a seeming evolution in their thought. As noted above, the Turkish Islamic intelligentsia had gone through a phase of "withdrawal" in the first decades following the creation of the republic. However, from the 1950s onward, a new, stronger Islamic intelligentsia emerged in the country. This intelligentsia developed a relatively coherent worldview up until the late 1990s, which included a

rejection of the West, democracy, and modernity that was much more comprehensive than their predecessors. Importantly, however, several leading figures following the 1997 coup made a reversal, embracing democracy and even the EU, and legitimizing them in Islamic terms.

In an extensive analysis of the thinking of six leading Islamic intellectuals, Sena Karasipahi notes that these thinkers, "in spite of their disapproval of modernity, benefited from and are affected by advancements and advantages of the Kemalist modernization project."⁸⁶ Usually born in midsize town in Anatolia, these figures benefited from the positivist education of the Republican educational institutions, and several of them also studied in the West, acquiring a familiarity with Western philosophy and thought in parallel to their focus on Islamic thought. Yet, much like Kısakürek and Topçu before them, their exposure to Western ideals did not lead them to embrace the West. Quite to the contrary, they all came to espouse a coherent and comprehensive rejection of the West.

Thus, the focus of these intellectuals is on upholding an Islamic way of life. They consider everything that is not derived from revelation as un-Islamic, and therefore reject in its totality the body of Western science and knowledge. They view it holistically, as a "whole set of political, economic, moral, philosophical, social and mental attitudes."⁸⁷ They emphasize the Christian nature of Western European civilization and "its incompatibility with the Turco-Muslim culture and heritage," and tend to "consider Western civilization as the source and reason for all the ills and problems of the contemporary world."⁸⁸ Thus, for Ali Bulaç, "every belief and social system that stems from paganism is 'sophistry' because it is deprived of divine wisdom." This line of thinking contrasts strongly with the late Ottoman-era thinkers and Islamic reformers, including Said Nursi, who sought to unite science and rationality with Islam.

Typically for Islamic scholars, these leading Turkish thinkers all object to democracy because it traces the source of sovereignty to the people, not God. Thus, Rasim Özdenören makes the logical

point that from this perspective, “we should ask where democracy is in accordance with Islam rather than where Islam is in accordance with democracy.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, in viewing democracy as essentially a majoritarian system, the Islamic intellectuals decry it as contrary to a social and cultural plurality that they claim is supported by Islam. This point is interesting in two ways: not only because Erdoğan and the AKP would later embrace a purely majoritarian view of democracy, but also because it fails to appreciate the nature of constitutional democracy, with its strong emphasis on institutions, checks and balances, and the protection of minorities.

As Ihsan Dağı observes:

“the duty of a ‘Muslim intellectual’ was to replace these concepts/ideas by Islamic ones which were not to justify their presence in Islam but to refute them in order to open up the way for the development of an alternative terminology based on Islam. Explain modern concepts and orders, criticize and falsify them, and then propose alternative ideas and concepts derived from Islam; this was the intellectual position of the young Islamist intellectuals like Ali Bulac in the 1980s.”⁹⁰

Following the 1997 coup, these ideas went through rapid change. Thus, a leading Islamic theologian who would become the AKP’s strong supporter, Hayrettin Karaman, came to endorse democracy from an Islamic perspective. Karaman had long been a critic of Erbakan, particularly his “Just Order” theories, which Karaman found divorced from reality. As Michelangelo Guida notes in a study of Karaman’s thinking, he embraced democracy, and:

“does not consider the Quranic principle of God’s sovereignty as an obstacle. Because God is indeed sovereign, His sovereignty on earth does not conflict with people’s sovereignty. Moreover, God has created man as *halife* (viceroys) on earth; consequently He gave men the responsibility of governing societies with justice.”⁹¹

As for Bulaç, he too revised his thinking. As Dağı notes, Bulaç’s

earlier position had “totally lost its relevance. He is now calling for full implementation of political modernity departing from his earlier fundamentalist/essentialist stand about modernity, modern ideas, values and institutions.”⁹² Now, he welcomed the implementation of democracy even though it would come as a result of outside, i.e., Western, pressure.⁹³ Bulaç, in fact, accepts that these changes in Islamist thinking were due to the 1997 coup, which sparked a rethinking among the Islamic groups in Turkey.⁹⁴

How far, and in which ways, do Islamists in fact embrace democracy? Karaman’s thinking is perhaps the most relevant, because of his influence over the AKP. Karaman underlines that an acceptance of democracy as a mode of government is limited by the confines of the Shari’a. Moreover, he emphasizes the differences between Islamic government and secular democracy, which does not accept God’s interference. Democracy is acceptable because among the various forms of government, it is the “best system possible,” and because it recalls the Islamic concept of *meşveret*, the accountability of government. In other words, “for what concerns the mechanism and technical aspects, we can find many similarities [between Islam and democracy].”⁹⁵ Karaman argues that, “you can use that medium, if the use of that medium is indispensable to slowly move toward Islam in the present conditions.”⁹⁶ He thus employs the Islamic concept of *Zaruret*, or necessity, which permits Muslims to engage in forbidden activity in a state of necessity or danger. In other words, Islamist thinkers concluded that following the events of 1997, an embrace of democracy and support for the EU had become a necessity in order to promote Islam because it was the only way to gain the upper hand over the state establishment that had booted the Welfare Party from power.

This line of thinking is visible in several early speeches by Erdoğan—one in which he announces that democracy is like a streetcar, where you get off when you reach your destination. It also emerges in his 1997 comment to the Muslim Youth Association, that democracy “would never be a goal ... from the intellectual

perspective, we see it is a medium.”⁹⁷

Leaving Behind Erbakan: From Welfare to Virtue to AKP

It was therefore only fitting that the successor party to the banned Welfare Party, the Virtue party (Fazilet Partisi, FP), presented itself as a break with the traditions of *Milli Görüş*. Indeed, in this sense, the FP was the “first AKP.” FP went to great lengths to assure that it was not a continuation of the Welfare Party. The leader of the party, Recai Kutan, stressed the importance of change: “Change everything except your spouse,” he enjoined the party faithful. All party organizations were ordered to hang up portraits of Atatürk, and beards were banned throughout the party organization.⁹⁸

In contrast to its predecessor RP, which had condemned the EU as a “Christian Club,” the FP favored EU membership. Also gone was Welfare’s opposition to NATO. Islamic themes were cleansed from the program of the new party: There was no more talk about adapting financial institutions to Islamic principles, or calls for the introduction of a partly Islamic legislation. Instead, the party program overflowed with references to human rights and democracy—indeed, these were themes that Erbakan had made the centerpiece of his political discourse since the 1997 coup.

The Virtue Party made a concerted effort to reach out to the secular bourgeoisie, including making peace with TÜSİAD. At a meeting with TÜSİAD, the FP representatives assured that they had abandoned the “Just Economic Order,” that they were supporters of the European Union and that they had decided not to interfere with interest rates. Prominent figures of the non-Islamic right, such as Cemil Çiçek, a nationalist-conservative, and Nazlı Ilıcak, a leading media figure of the Istanbul bourgeoisie, were invited to the party. For the first time in the history of the *Milli Görüş*, women were elected to Parliament, Ilıcak among them.

However, the first—and only—election that the FP contested in 1999 was a setback. The party received a mere 15 percent of the votes, which fell well below the 21 percent that its predecessor RP had received in the preceding election in 1995. The party did better

at the municipal level, where it came first on a national basis, gathering over 18 percent of votes. The FP’s result was all the more disappointing as it had been unable to profit from the major setback that the parties of the center-right simultaneously suffered in the election. The winners were instead the nationalist left and nationalist far right, respectively. It appeared that Turkish voters had not been impressed by the RP’s time in government and did not see the changing rhetoric of the party leaders as genuine.

The 1999 election setback set off a renewed search for changes of the party and its policies. The discussions were concentrated on the issue of party democracy, with a younger group, represented at the central level by Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınc, calling for more democratic leadership, for less top-down designation of party officials. More importantly, the group, which came to be labeled “reformers” in the media, pressed for political and ideological changes. They engaged in open self-criticism, condemning the policies that had been pursued during the Welfare Party era. At an internal party conference in 2000, Arınc unsentimentally trashed the policies of RP and in particular its stances on international issues. When Oğuzhan Asiltürk, a senior representative of those who came to be known as the “traditionalists,” sought to counter Arınc’s judgments—he was reportedly the only one who dared to do so—he was called to order by the chair of the meeting, who reminded him that, “Welfare is dead, this is Virtue.”⁹⁹

On the same occasion, Abdullah Gül gave what was reported to have been a dramatic speech, in which he observed that, “during the February 28 process and the closure process against RP not a single Muslim country offered us any support.”¹⁰⁰ There was a bitter tone in Gül’s speech. After all, he was the one who had been the ideological architect of the D-8, an attempt to create a Muslim alternative to the Western power constellation led by the United States, only to see that none of those supposedly allied countries showed any solidarity with Turkey’s Islamists in their darkest hour. But Gül had above all made a realistic assessment of global power realities: “from now on, the official policies of the party need to be

turned toward Europe and the United States,” he concluded.¹⁰¹ In an interview, Gül said “We are trying to have a better understanding of the changing world, of events, and pursue more realistic policies.”¹⁰²

Arınc’s position was much the same: “In our relations with the West we behaved in a way that created the wrong impression about us. . . . For example, we equated hostility to Israel with hostility to Jews. Statements that could be interpreted as anti-Semitic expression really put us in a difficult spot, especially at the beginning of the Welfare-True Path coalition.”¹⁰³ It is worth noting that Arınc in this statement seemed to assume that if the Turkish Islamists took care to confine their hostility to Israel, it would somehow not have put them in a difficult spot in the West.

Arınc deplored that defense of the goal of EU membership had been seen as treason to the motherland during the Welfare era, and that the party had espoused “fringe ideas” like an Islamic currency, an Islamic Common Market, and an Islamic Defense Organization. Of course, said Arınc, one could always wish for things like that, but there was no chance they were going to happen. The same went for the “Just Order:” “We were never able to fill a slogan like ‘Just Order’ with content. None other than Erbakan displayed the ability to at least talk about it. And not many people were convinced by what he said.”¹⁰⁴

The response of the “traditionalists” to the onslaught of the “reformers” was not to cling to old positions; in no way did these voices suggest that the Virtue Party return to opposing EU membership or to picking fights with the United States. What they defended was that there were, in fact, no real ideological differences in the party: “Is there anyone left who is against EU today in the party?” Şevket Kazan, a leading figure of the old guard, asked rhetorically. “There is no one who is against the EU anymore because there is no more reason left to be against EU,” he insisted.¹⁰⁵

Asiltürk, who had dared to oppose Arınc at the internal party

gathering when the latter had passed judgment on the past, relates a conversation that he had with Abdullah Gül at the time: “Gül said to me, ‘we cannot get into a fight with America.’ I told him, ‘How could we get into a fight with America? I am only saying that we have the right to be critical of American policies in the Middle East.’”¹⁰⁶

This conversation between Asiltürk and Gül, dating to 2000-2001, conjures the sense of defeat that informed the positions both sides took in the debates that shook the *Milli Görüş* at the turn of the millennium, and which eventually led to the split of the movement in 2001. Both sides were trying to grapple with the blow that the 1997 coup had dealt, with the historic defeat inflicted on the Islamic movement by the military and the secular elites, with the United States understood to be in the background. And as Asiltürk’s comments reveal, the traditionalists now also concluded that American interests were simply too strong for them to challenge. What he said to Gül was *we are too weak to fight the United States*. But unlike Gül, Asiltürk still remained a critic of America’s Middle Eastern policies. Gül made a virtue of realism. His stance was, essentially, “If you can’t beat them, join them.” Expressing some bitterness, Asiltürk also relates a conversation with a person who “would go on to hold the highest office,” presumably Gül, in which he recalls asking why the “reformers” had said the same things as he did only yesterday, but now were dancing to another tune. “We can never come to power with those ideas,” he recalled his interlocutor saying.¹⁰⁷

This comes across clearly in these lines from the booklet that Gül distributed to the delegates at the congress of the Virtue Party on May 14, 2000, when he failed in his bid for the party leadership:

“Maybe the expression is going to appear strange, but I nonetheless think that I have to express myself. There is a defeat for us, which we have to concede as such. The issue is about civilizations ... there is a meeting, almost a clash of civilizations. On the one hand, there is the Western civilization, on the other hand, the theses that we have defended from the

start. As I see it, this is a melancholy voyage ... We are clearly faced with a defeat; our own culture, our own civilization ... We did not succeed in demonstrating the superiority of our claims, of our theses. But we are happy about the result.”¹⁰⁸

But the days of the Virtue Party were numbered. On May 2, 1999, FP Member of Parliament Merve Kavakçı entered Parliament wearing an Islamic headscarf, prompting a major crisis over the party’s commitment to secularism. Five days later, the chief prosecutor delivered an indictment seeking the party’s closure. This threat of closure loomed over the party when it held its first convention a year later. It was not enough to oust the old guard: Gül received a respectable 521 votes in the leadership contest, but the Erbakan loyalist Recai Kutan won with 633. On June 22, 2001, Virtue was banned. By that time, the split was a reality: The two groups were already working on the creation of their new, respective parties. The traditionalist “Felicity Party,” *Saadet Partisi*, was created on July 20, 2001, and on August 14, 68 founders, mainly representatives of the “reformist” wing of FP and a number of conservative center-right politicians created the Justice and Development Party, electing Erdoğan its Chairman. The AKP would go on to run in the 2002 general election as a “post-Islamist” party, embracing EU accession and democratic reforms, seemingly leaving behind the legacy of Erbakan and *Milli Görüş*.

What Was the Struggle About?

At this point, it is useful to review what exactly the split that created the AKP was about. Was it about ideology, personalities, or tactics—or what combination of these?

In terms of ideology, several aspects deserve study. As documented above, the *Milli Görüş* tradition was fundamentally authoritarian and anti-democratic; it espoused economic thinking that was becoming outdated; it was anti-European and anti-Western; and it was anti-Semitic, basing its worldview to a considerable extent on belief in a Jewish world conspiracy. The AKP then rebranded itself to rid itself of that baggage.

As discussed above, Turkish Islamic intellectuals and Islamist political leaders both changed their views on democracy in a relatively short period of time. Indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s, Turkish Islamic intellectuals had been moving toward a wholesale rejection of democracy as a Western system of government incompatible with Islam because of its refusal to accept the sovereignty of God and to recognize the relevance of divine revelation.¹⁰⁹ The sea change among the intellectuals came in parallel with the evolution of the Virtue Party leaders between 1999 and 2001. Indeed, it was inescapably a direct result of the 1997 military coup and cannot be understood in isolation from the equally dramatic shift in perception of the EU. As late as 1997, leading figures from Erbakan down habitually decried the EU as a Christian club; saw Turkish membership in the EU as a subjugation to the Western masters, a condition that would forever leave Turkey underdeveloped as the world capitalist system made rich countries richer and poor countries poorer; and vigorously supported the development of the D-8 alliance of Islamic countries as an alternative to the EU.

But by 1999, Erbakan and his closest advisors were appealing to European institutions for support on the basis of the violation of their democratic and human rights. They had, in fact, embraced the rhetoric of democracy, just as Islamist intellectuals like Ali Bulaç and Hayrettin Karaman had provided a theological legitimization for democracy as a system of government compatible, in principle and under certain conditions, with Islam. These conditions—primarily, that nothing in a democracy could override the teachings of Islamic law and the sovereignty of God—were nevertheless left out of the rhetoric of the Virtue Party leaders.

In any case, these changes predated the creation of the AKP; they were introduced upon the creation of the Virtue Party almost three years earlier. However, it is clear that the architects of the AKP, particularly Abdullah Gül, were also the architects of the reforms in the Islamic movement predating the creation of the party. Indeed, the Saadet Party, continuing the *Milli Görüş* tradition, would discard

some of these reforms and return to a more traditional Islamist critique of the West. In Erbakan's *Davam*, these updated views on Europe and the EU are nowhere to be found. In *Davam*, he returns to an unapologetic defense of the core *Milli Görüş* anti-European stance, and a spirited defense of the concept of the D-8.¹¹⁰ Yet in 2000, the reformers within the movement had succeeded in imposing their new views of democracy and Europe on the party. Thus, it was hardly the reason for the creation of the AKP.

In the economic realm, similarly, the FP had made it clear that it embraced capitalism, sought peace with TÜSIAD, and abandoned the "Just Order" rhetoric, even in its watered-down version dating to 1994. Yet one part of the *Milli Görüş* ideology was not subject to considerable debate: the views of Israel and the Jews. While the AKP's creators showed a realization of the political dangers of overtly anti-Semitic rhetoric, and Gül and Erdoğan would reach out to Jewish organizations in the United States as a part of the effort to obtain support in the West, nowhere in the debates surrounding the creation of either the FP, or subsequently the AKP, was there a denunciation of the coherent deeply anti-Semitic belief system that formed the core of the *Milli Görüş* worldview. If anything, while this component was central to the movement's ideology, it was not subjected to any serious reckoning.

Yet the movement's anti-European policies were based on the belief that the EU, just like NATO or the Bilderberg group, was an institution controlled by world Jewry. Similarly, its criticism of capitalism, while evolving, was based on the notion that world Jewry controlled world capital. In this sense, the transformation of the movement was at the very least incomplete. It visibly debated and changed its views on what it had previously identified as the *symptoms* of the problems: the EU or capitalism. Yet it only toned down its denunciation of the *core* of the problem—the alleged Jewish domination of the world. In this sense, a political transformation that appears deep and comprehensive in fact turns out to be comparatively shallow. It also appears to be opportunistic; prompted, if not coerced, by the blow that the movement took from

the 1997 military intervention.

It is indeed ironic that one stated aim of the military intervention was to counter Turkey's slide away from the goal of EU membership. In the Turkish context of the 1990s, considerable elements of both the elite and society saw nothing wrong in the notion of a military intervention to uphold European integration. Of course, European leaders viewed a military intervention into politics with equal or greater repugnance than they viewed the rise of Islamism. It could in fact be said that the 1997 coup tilted the balance in Western circles toward viewing the Turkish state and its secular authoritarianism, rather than the Islamists, as the main problem facing Turkey's democracy and European integration. To their credit, the Islamist movement's leaders saw the opportunity arising from this and adopted a rhetoric that fit right into European notions of democracy and human rights. The problem, however, is that the speed of the transformation and its obviously self-serving nature generates doubts about its sincerity. In this sense, there is little doubt that a considerable portion of the rationale for the Islamist movement's transformation was tactical. Leading figures even admitted as much, noting that their ideals had been defeated, and it was time to move on, barring which they would never be able to reach power.

In that context, the decision to split the party and to create the AKP was tantamount to an accident, and, in a sense, another unintended consequence of the Turkish establishment's actions. Had the constitutional court not closed down the Virtue Party, which was already reeling from its poor performance in the 1999 elections, it is highly doubtful that the party's reformist wing would have taken the trouble of splitting to build a new party from scratch. But the closure of FP provided the opportunity to shed the baggage of the old guard, the Erbakan loyalists epitomized by Recai Kutan and Oğuzhan Asiltürk. Instead, two new parties now competed for the allegiance of the old FP infrastructure. And, particularly on the provincial and municipal level, the reformers had an edge, being able to attract the lion's share of FP cadres whose

practical involvement in local government had attuned them to the reformers' message. With the warring center-right parties, the DYP and ANAP, in a visible state of decay, the AKP leaders sealed the deal by reaching out to important figures of the center-right, who saw in the new party a better political hope than the sinking ships they were tied to.

Conclusion: "The Liberal Hope"

An important factor in the rise of the AKP was the legitimization provided by Turkey's liberal intelligentsia. But how did Turkey's liberals so wholeheartedly embrace a party that had only rebranded itself rapidly and in a very shallow manner?

When the AKP was founded in 2001, the former Islamists stated that democratization was going to be their mission. Obviously, this claim was not universally accepted, but it appeared reasonable enough to many non-Islamists in Turkey. Indeed, it did to the intellectual trendsetters among the liberal intelligentsia. And the international consensus on what had taken place in Turkey in 2002 was certainly not that it was a "green revolution," but a democratic revolution. The AKP's claims to stand for "conservative democracy" resonated in what was a long-established intellectual context. What the AKP said was in fact grounded in a discourse which had a long prehistory.

There was an intellectual predisposition among the liberal Turkish intelligentsia, and in urban circles in general, to welcome the advent of a political force of the AKP's sort; it fulfilled the expectations of a certain way of thinking about the prospects of democracy in Turkey that had gained wide traction in Turkish intellectual life during the preceding two decades. The rise of the AKP occurred in an intellectual context that was marked by a set of theses about state-society relations and about their impact on democratization: What had prevailed in the shape of the "post-Islamists" was seen to be civil society; it was the "periphery" that was understood to have prevailed over the state, the "center."

The left and the liberals had for at least two decades theorized

about Turkish politics and history in terms of a presumed, structural opposition between state and society, and which ascribes an intrinsic democratic character to those forces of the "periphery" that rise to challenge the power of the "center." Political scientist Yüksel Taşkın states that the AKP addressed the material as well as the nonmaterial aspirations of the masses by manufacturing a presumed political antagonism between "the silent Muslim majority and a disproportionately active and influential Westernist minority."¹¹ But that is not quite correct; the AKP did not have to manufacture any antagonism—others had been doing that for decades. Rather, the AKP reaped the benefits, taking advantage of the patrimonial aspects of the Kemalist system to paint an oversimplified picture of themselves as virtuous liberals standing against the Kemalist state.

As Finnish scholar Toni Alaranta has argued:

"The dominant scholarship on modern Turkey has for several decades produced an image of an authoritarian and even fascist Kemalist regime that was ended by the 'democratic' Muslims of the AKP. Two fundamental mistakes have thus been committed: one concerns the nature of the regime that the AKP replaced and the second is about the nature of the Islamists. The narrative peddled by the AKP and its supporters is that the party has ushered in democracy by putting an end to what is portrayed as a regime run by elitist Kemalists, Westernizers who were alien to the culture of their own country, and who for eighty years supposedly suppressed the Anatolian conservative Muslims; and these latter are taken to be the sole and legitimate expression of the popular will. That there was such a wide expectation that the AKP would indeed usher in pluralist, liberal values and democratization in Turkey was to a considerable degree based on the Turkish liberals' role in legitimating the party as the 'voice of the oppressed.' From their chairs in prestigious universities, for nearly two decades, liberal Turkish academics drummed in the message of how the awful 'Kemalist state' was repressing and

harassing pious Muslims. In doing this, they uncritically—and certainly very usefully—reproduced and transmitted the most emotionally powerful narrative trope used by the Turkish Islamist movement.”¹¹²

Fatma Müge Göçek, a sociologist at the University of Michigan, exemplifies this intellectual mindset when she explains why the AKP embodied a liberal hope: “The emergence of the AKP was a significant democratic advance since it heralded the break of the rule of the state and the inclusion of those who had thus far been excluded by the system.”¹¹³ Such populist rhetoric about the supposed “exclusion” of the ordinary people has been a permanent feature of the political discourse of the Turkish right, of conservatives, since the beginning of the multiparty era in 1950.

Traditionally, Turkey’s conservative parties have been extremely successful in exploiting populism. They have cultivated the notion of a supposed antagonism between the “people” and the “state elite,” posing as the champions of the “people” against the “elite,” the state, and the “bureaucracy.” The slogan of the conservative Democrat Party (DP) in the first free elections in 1950 was telling: “It’s enough, it’s now up to the people to decide.” That phrase very much set the tone for the rhetoric of the right until its present incarnation, the AKP.

The idea of an imagined confrontation between the state and the people has been fed by the notion of a “clash of civilizations” that has supposedly ravaged Turkey. The originally Marxist notion of alienation occupies a central place in this discourse and historical narrative, as the verses of Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (the ultraconservative poet and novelist who has been a major source of inspiration for Turkish conservatives and Islamists, discussed in detail above) evoke: “You are a stranger in your own homeland, a pariah in your own homeland.”

But the important point here is the ideological “cross-fertilizing” that has taken place between conservatives/Islamists on the one hand and leftists and liberals on the other. While the former, in the

shape of the AKP, claimed to be democrats, the latter—the urban, secular, leftist, and liberal intelligentsia—had well before that conversely appropriated the conservative notion that the Turkish state oppressed the identity of the people.

This leftist and liberal discourse early on located the reasons for Turkey’s political travails during the last 200 years—the presumed weakness of civil society, as well as the presumed cultural alienation of the popular masses—in the oppression of civil society by an authoritarian state that, according to this narrative, set out to change the culture of the people. And it has been of decisive importance that Turkish leftist thinking has adopted the worldview of conservatism. Instead of explaining the authoritarianism of the state in the usual, Marxist, materialist terms—according to which the state is the agent of the economically dominant class—it has adopted a notion of authoritarianism as an expression of cultural rather than economic interests: There is no class conflict, but a clash of civilization, with a culturally alien state elite waging a culture war against its own people.

The intellectual elaborations of the left have been deeply consequential because they switched the attention of leftist intellectuals away from what usually absorbs the left: class relations and the perceived need to alter these relations to the benefit of the “subjugated” classes. Instead of on the “dominating” class, the attention was focused on the state, the Marxist problem of “class oppression” having been substituted with the problem of “state oppression.” Abandoning class politics meant that identity politics came into focus, and that was instrumental in paving the way for the rise of the Islamist parties.

From the end of the 1960s, Turkish leftist intellectuals—many of whom would later convert to liberalism—abandoned Marxist notions of class, which they deemed to lack explanatory power in the Turkish context. Instead, they started to fashion a discourse that conjured a state-society conflict as a more adequate guide to an understanding of Turkish politics.

The thinking of the right and of the left converged in identifying the Turkish state as an agent of a Western civilization that allegedly violates the culture, religion, and traditions of the Muslim people. For example, Mehmet Ali Aybar, the leader of the socialist Labor Party of Turkey (TİP)—the party had its greatest success when it had 15 deputies elected to Parliament in the elections in 1965—argued that Turkey was different from Western countries in that it lacked the kind of social class divides found there. It was not the bourgeoisie that was the oppressing class in Turkey, but the state class: “In the final analysis the dominant class also today (as in the Ottoman era) is the military-civilian bureaucracy. There is no equivalent of this in the West.”¹¹⁴

Leftist intellectuals, just like their conservative counterparts, thus saw the state as being culturally estranged from the popular masses and hostile to the people’s cultural and religious traditions, and furthermore identified this as the explanation for the lack of democracy and a free society in Turkey. The legacy left by Kemalism, the fact that the Turkish state had indeed initially interfered with the cultural identity of the Anatolian Muslim population in the process of engineering the emergence of a Turkish nation, naturally shifted attention to matters of cultural belonging and religion when the state was singled out as the reason why democracy and freedom continued to elude Turkey.

This particular concept—the dichotomy between an authoritarian state and an oppressed society—privileged the view that it was religious and social conservatives, and ultimately Islamic conservatives, who were the potential agents of democratization: They were understood to be the most significant representatives of a civil society waiting to be freed from its chains, as they were assumed to represent the “silent majority.” The liberal and leftist intelligentsia thus came to assume that, because religious and social conservatives were in opposition to an authoritarian state that allegedly violated the culture of the people, they were going to advance the cause of democratization.

During the 1980s, the generation of intellectuals in Turkey who had

come of age as leftist during the 1960s and 1970s gradually moved toward liberalism; this move, in turn, took place as a result of the fatal blow to the left that the military coup in 1980 had delivered, but it was also a result of the changing international conjuncture. The 1980s witnessed a revival and ultimately the triumph of free market ideology in the United States under Ronald Reagan and in the U.K. under Margaret Thatcher. The subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to spell the end of leftist utopias:

“One relatively new viewpoint on Turkey, which emerged after the 1980 military coup and gained popularity among intellectuals of both left and right during the 1990s, conceives of the peculiar character of Turkey’s democratization process as a struggle against the tutelage of bureaucratic elites, especially the Turkish military. This ... analysis of socio-political power relations in Turkey argues that the main axes of political conflict have been dichotomies such as state-society, center-periphery, and bureaucracy-bourgeoisie. ... To some extent this was the Turkish counterpart of the ‘state-civil society debate’ that took place in the 1980s and 1990s among Western and Eastern European intellectual and political circles. ... It is shared by people from widely different political backgrounds, whether liberals, liberal leftists, Islamists or conservatives.”¹¹⁵

Leading Turkish sociologist Metin Heper has argued that, “the post-1980 period in Turkey has witnessed the rise of a state-centric (in analytical terms) but anti-statist (in normative terms) discourse,” which has become hegemonic in academic and public milieus. Conventionally known as the “strong state tradition,” this approach to the state is based on a series of arguments about Ottoman-Turkish history.¹¹⁶ These arguments center around a peculiar historical continuity incarnated in a “strong state-weak society tradition” in Ottoman-Turkish history, the claim about the weakness of the bourgeoisie and its dependence on the state, the presentation of the cleavage between the bourgeoisie and the civilian and military bureaucratic elites as the main dynamic

of power relations and social change, the everlasting dominance of a patrimonial state-society relationship in which the highly independent state is not responsible to the social forces of the allegedly non-autonomous market economy.

Scholars Akça, Bekmen and Özden note that the state-centered hegemonic narrative suffers from several theoretical as well as historical and empirical problems. It assumes that the state stands outside and above society as an entity in itself, clearly differentiated from the society and as an autonomous subject capable of taking measures in pursuit of its own, distinctive interests, a “force in its own right”:

“The authoritarian nature of the state and the political sphere in Turkey is explained solely through the nationalist and militarist crystallization of the state and the power of the state elites (and especially the military elites and their military tutelage.) ... neither the institutional architecture of the state nor the practices of the state elites are assumed to be constructed by specifically class-based socio-political relations of dominance.”¹¹⁷

It was, remarkably, a socialist intellectual who first spelled out the historical mission of the Turkish Islamic movement and who identified Islamic conservatism as the agent of democratic salvation. Few books or texts rival the intellectual impact of İdris Küçükömer’s *Düzenin Yabancılaşması* (*The Alienation of the System*), which was an intellectual sensation when it was published in 1969. *The Alienation of the System* became a cornerstone of Turkish intellectual life by introducing what was to be the dominant intellectual paradigm of the country. Its author, a socialist economist who was active in the socialist TİP, credited Islamic conservatives with the historical mission of emancipating civil society and bringing democracy to Turkey.

Küçükömer challenged the traditional notions of “left” and “right” in Turkey and turned these notions on their heads: The “left,” which pretended to be progressive, was really reactionary,

while the “right,” deemed reactionary by the left, in fact stood for what was progressive. The “left” was undemocratic, the “right” was democratic. The “left,” more precisely the secularist state elite, had for two centuries, since the beginning of the Ottoman modernization, looked down on and despised the pious, conservative masses and sought to impose its modernist values on them. This is what the title of the book conjures up: the alienation of the system from the culture of the masses. It was the dialectic between the state and society that accounted for why civil society never had had any chance to assert itself in Turkey. It was the bureaucratic-despotic state that was the obstacle to the democratization. In contrast, the hope of the future was the conservative “right,” which represented the Islamic masses, and which challenged the bureaucratic-despotic Westernizing state: The Islamic conservatives were the ones that were going to emancipate civil society and bring democracy to Turkey.

This state-centric analytical approach has led liberals and many other pro-democrats astray. It has limited the political horizon of the pro-democracy forces in Turkey and misled them to regard the AKP as a liberal hope, just because it stood in opposition to the entrenched state establishment. Democratization came to be understood simply as “civilianization,” as being about rolling back the state—and in particular the military, which more than any other institution, epitomized state power. The state was deemed to be “a force in its own right,” and hence assumed to be the only substantial obstacle to the institution of a free society.

But the expectation of liberals that a state defeated by the formerly “oppressed” was going to be a different, democratic state rested on more than a set of assumptions about the “Jacobinism” of the Turkish state. They came to view the AKP as a liberal hope also because liberal and leftist thinking relied on a set of assumptions about the supposed counter-force to the state—the bourgeoisie—and about the innately emancipating nature of the particular kind of bourgeoisie that was the principal force behind the AKP. Simply put, just like the Marxists, who had expected deliverance for humanity

from the proletariat, the Turkish leftist and liberal intelligentsia had come to expect one particular social class—the pious bourgeoisie—to deliver freedom.

The leftist and liberal intelligentsia had come to believe that the “periphery” was destined to be an agent of democratization because they assumed the business class that was the principal force behind the AKP to represent an “authentic bourgeoisie” as opposed to the old, secular business class that traditionally had entertained a close relation with the state. As they theorized on why democracy eluded Turkey, liberal and leftist intellectuals were confronted with one particularly intriguing anomaly: Why had Turkey not experienced a bourgeois revolution? Why had the bourgeoisie not forced the authoritarian state to surrender its hold on society and become more democratic, to expand freedoms, as the case had been in the West? Their conclusion was that this bourgeoisie, which was mainly located in the Istanbul area and along the Western coastal rim of Turkey, was not “authentic.” Instead, it was “tired,” “a creation of the state,” and unable as well as unused to stand on its own feet and push for political liberties, since it had remained beholden to its benefactor, the authoritarian state. A leading Turkish intellectual, Murat Belge, argues that, “because the Turkish bourgeoisie was the product of a monopolist state capitalism, it was also very much reconciled with the military.”¹¹⁸

In contrast, these thinkers saw hope in the religiously conservative business class that had appeared and grown strong in conservative Anatolian cities like Konya, Kayseri, and Gaziantep since the Turkish economy opened up to the world in the 1980s. They were the socioeconomic driver of the AKP’s rise to power, and liberals and leftists fully expected this business class to play the traditional role of the bourgeoisie as a force for democratization. After all, it had prospered on its own devices, not thanks to state tenders.

This is not the way things played out. State influence over the economy has, in fact, increased during the AKP’s time in power, and a new version of the old, state-run crony capitalism has evolved.¹¹⁹ This may explain why the business interests that

support the AKP have failed to live up to the expectations of being an “authentic” bourgeoisie. But a decade ago, the liberals were predisposed to see the AKP as “a party that represents the power struggle of the authentic Turkish-Islamic bourgeoisie.”¹²⁰

After the AKP’s 2007 landslide, a liberal intellectual wrote jubilantly that, “as we see it, the AKP’s election victory shows that a real bourgeois revolution has taken place in Turkey. Turkey’s authentic bourgeoisie has finally emerged victorious from the power struggle that it has waged—with its mores and traditions—during the last century against the military and civilian bureaucrats.”¹²¹

The idea of the AKP as a liberal hope is not dead. There is a tendency among liberals to explain the authoritarian drift of Turkey under the AKP as an “Erdoğan problem” rather than as a structural or systemic problem. Murat Belge recently stated that it had once been possible to engage in a dialogue about democratization with people from the AKP, and he regretted that Erdoğan’s drift has now severed these contacts. Baskın Oran, another prominent liberal, assured that the Anatolian bourgeoisie is ultimately going to assert itself as a democratizing force and said that one just needs to be patient. Thus, the bourgeois revolution has not been cancelled; it has only been postponed, waiting to resume when Erdoğan has left the scene.¹²²

The “New Turkey” Project: Authoritarianism and Islamization



The preceding section sought to excavate and understand the origin and development of the AKP as a political movement. The AKP’s ideological roots, however, only tell part of the story. It must also be evaluated on the basis of its record of governance. As the following pages will show, this record is increasingly and remarkably consistent with the picture painted above of a staunch Islamist movement that embraced the technical mechanics of electoral democracy, but not its underlying values, and underwent a rebranding process to make itself more palatable to domestic as well as international constituencies.

The “New Turkey” project can, analytically speaking, be separated into three areas—the political, the cultural, and the economic—in which the country that is being built differs considerably from the Turkey of the past. The political system that the leaders of the

AKP are working to implement is distinctly illiberal and autocratic, treating public support for their rule as a formality to be engineered in elections that may be free but certainly not fair. This political system is to be undergirded by a cultural change, a Turkey that the government is seeking to make solidly Islamic in its values and worldview. Finally, the economy of this new Turkey is essentially a crony capitalist system under the ruling party’s control.

The AKP’s 12 years of single-party rule display a nearly linear, if not accelerating, progression toward these goals. As already seen, the party started out by embracing democracy, Europe, and the liberal market economy when campaigning against a semi-authoritarian system. However, by 2015, it had become a force embattled at home and abroad because of its own authoritarian, Islamist, and crony capitalist tendencies. Put otherwise, the AKP’s interest in

democracy, Europe, and liberal economics evolved in inverse correlation to its control over the levers of power.

During its first term, the AKP implemented some of the most thorough economic and political reforms in Turkey's history. At the time, these reforms generated an enormous amount of goodwill in the west for Erdoğan and the AKP, which would last until the Gezi Park crackdown of 2013, long after the AKP had reversed course. Indeed, the systematic regression during the AKP's second and third terms in power raises the question of whether the democratic approach of the first term was genuine, especially since the liberalization of 2002-2006 had the instrumental value for the AKP of undermining the position of the entrenched state elites. Indeed, there are two mutually exclusive possibilities. In one, the AKP's democratic rhetoric was genuine, and its authoritarian drift was the result of any combination of three factors: European alienation of Turkey; the entrenched resistance of the Kemalist elite trying to close down the party by undemocratic means; and Erdoğan's overbearing and increasingly autocratic personality. Alternatively, the pro-European rhetoric was simply tactical, an attempt to gain an external lever against the republican establishment, which waned as the AKP leadership no longer needed the West's support to defeat its internal enemies.

The answer to this question is of considerable importance. If the problem was that the West and the Kemalists alienated a somewhat unstable Erdoğan, then Turkey's experience over the past decade would not constitute an indictment of "moderate" political Islam. In this case, Turkey's trajectory would have little bearing on the compatibility of democracy and political Islam, other than perhaps suggesting that the West should be even more open and inclusive toward Islamic political movements and even more hostile to unelected secularist forces in Muslim countries. If, on the other hand, Turkey's authoritarian direction is a direct result of the AKP's approach and underlying ideology, the consequences for our understanding of Turkish politics, as well as political Islam more broadly, are significant. If, even in Turkey, where political Islam is

at its most moderate, it has been unable to internalize the values and principles of democracy, then the outlook for Islamic political movements is bleak indeed.

The following section will provide a chronological overview of the AKP's turn toward authoritarianism, studying the more specific key elements of this trend: the assault on the establishment, the muzzling of the press, and Erdoğan's ambitions for one-man rule. Attention will then turn to the significant Islamization policies that have appeared in the last three to four years, as well as to the economic dimensions of Erdoğan's rule.

The AKP's Authoritarian Drift

The evolution of the AKP and its relationship to democratic values has been largely linear. Its first term, from 2002 to 2007, was relatively benign, although the term ended with a significant controversy over the presidential election. The second term saw serious backtracking, including the rise of a one-man management of the party and government, as well as the dismantling of the republican establishment and the beginning of efforts to muzzle the press. The third term saw a turn to authoritarianism and the effort to construct a presidential system devoid of checks and balances.

Yet, the AKP's time in power can be divided into more specific periods. The period of reform was really limited to its first three years, ending in 2005. From 2005 to 2007, the AKP focused on consolidating power, culminating in the contested presidential election that year. From 2007 to 2010, the AKP, in alliance with the Gülen movement, fought an all-out war against the secular establishment, which it won. Then, from 2011 to 2013, Erdoğan turned toward realizing his ambition of one-man rule. This dream largely collapsed with the Gezi Park uprising, the falling out with the Gülen movement, and massive corruption cases against AKP ministers in late 2013. From 2013 to the present, Erdoğan was forced on the defensive, and in spite of allying with the military against Gülen and seeking to curb freedom of expression, his party lost its majority in the 2015 elections.

2002-2005: Unseating Semi-Authoritarianism— Rising Tides Lift All Boats

The AKP came to power in the wake of the devastating financial crisis of 2000-2001 and the electorate's complete rejection of the established political class in the November 2002 elections. Although it won just over 34 percent of the total votes cast, it was only one of two parties to enter Parliament due to Turkey's exceptionally high 10 percent electoral threshold. As a result, although supported by only roughly a third of the public, the AKP ended up with two-thirds of the seats (363 out of 550) in Parliament.

During its first term, the AKP's economic and political reforms led to an extended period of high growth, broadened minority rights, and allowed Turkey to begin negotiations for membership in the European Union. By late 2004, the AKP-dominated Parliament had passed seven large reform packages, which the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) tended to support. Its economic policies, building on an International Monetary Fund stabilization package initiated by a center-left caretaker government in 2001-2002 following the financial crisis, managed to stabilize Turkey's currency for the first time in decades, opening the way for considerable foreign investment and spectacular economic growth. These reforms brought Turkish laws and regulations considerably in line with the EU *acquis*, reduced the military's role in politics, and made the process of closing down political parties considerably more difficult. The government struck a new, more conciliatory tone concerning the Kurdish issue and implemented reforms to broaden minority cultural rights.

These reforms were significant: They heralded the undoing of the sclerotic and stagnant system that had been in place since the early 1990s and which the February 1997 military intervention had reinforced. Under this system, governments were elected; but the fragmentation of the political system meant that Turkey was run by weak coalitions. That, in turn, enabled the military and judiciary elites to wield considerable influence. Military and judicial

institutions maintained a hard line on the Kurdish issue, repressed the rise of Islamist elites, and ensured that the Armenian issue and a number of other matters of Turkey's past remained outside of polite discussion.

The Kemalist elites had shown a remarkable inability to adapt to changing times, maintaining a system that was not fit for a Turkey seeking membership in the EU. Against this background, the AKP was riding high around 2005. Whatever its intentions, even many skeptics were forced to accept that the AKP, like a tide, had raised all boats. Even if their main intention had been to make Turkey more hospitable for Islamic conservatives, they had done so by making Turkey more hospitable in general.

However, there were signs that, in retrospect, seem like harbingers of things to come. One is the beginning of the process of muzzling the press. While the mainstream media was largely supportive of the AKP, the ruling party used state institutions to destroy the media empire run by Cem Uzan, a controversial tycoon whose political party had risen to form a challenge to the AKP. Uzan had created a political party, the "Genç Parti" (The Young Party), which came out of nowhere to win 7 percent in the 2002 elections. Uzan's populist party was also the only one that kept growing in popularity after those elections, prompting Erdoğan to state in early 2003 that "our only rival is the Young Party."¹²³

In 2004, the Turkish state's Savings Deposits Insurance Fund (SDIF) seized Uzan's *Star* newspaper and television channel. At the time, the AKP enjoyed widespread elite support, while Uzan was seen largely as a crook—being notorious, among other things, for losing a \$4.2 billion U.S. fraud case in 2003 filed by Motorola—and thus there was little reaction to the takeover of his media empire, including from the U.S. government, which was attempting to help Motorola recoup its losses. The *Star* TV channel was sold to the Doğan Media Group, which at the time was on good terms with the government, while the eponymous newspaper was acquired by a pro-AKP business group with close connections to Northern Cyprus. As will be seen below, it was not the last time the SDIF

was used, and in retrospect, the *Star* case was the model by which subsequent takeovers happened.

Another early indication of the AKP's intentions was its practice of purging government offices and replacing civil servants with elements closer to the party's ideological views. This practice is far from specific to the AKP; in Turkey, there is even a word for it, *Kadrolaşma*, derived from the word *kadro*, or cadres, and translated roughly as “cadrelization,” replacing cadres across the bureaucracy. As discussed above, the 1970s governments that included the NSP had engaged in *kadrolaşma*, allowing the Naqshbandis to infiltrate the state planning organization. But the scope and magnitude of cadrelization, once the AKP controlled all government ministries and agencies, was unprecedented. To give some idea of the scale of the AKP's *kadrolaşma*, staunch secularist president Ahmet Necdet Sezer refused to approve the nomination of over 4,000 appointees to senior government jobs, forcing the AKP to fill many positions only on an acting basis. By 2005, many young secular graduates of Turkey's top universities began to realize that many government jobs were no longer given on the basis of merit, but on the basis of loyalty to the ruling party, which took an active role in reviewing the promotion lists for government agencies, including striking out those with Dönme heritage—Jews that had publicly converted to Islam in the 17th century.

In this first period, Erdoğan as a leader was a *primus inter pares* rather than the dominant figure he later became. It is seldom recalled that one of the reasons for the party's break from the *Milli Görüş* tradition was the urge to move away from Necmettin Erbakan's three-decade long, single-handed dominance over Turkey's Islamist politics. In distinction, the AKP espoused a more collegial, more democratic decision-making system. This approach largely persisted during the AKP's first term in power.

Erdoğan was prime minister, but Abdullah Gül wielded significant influence, and played a crucial role as a balancing and moderating force on Erdoğan. A tale told privately by a colleague of both men is illustrative: Coming out of a particularly tense meeting in Brussels

with EU representatives in or around 2004, Erdoğan pulled up the leg of his suit and showed Gül bruises on his ankle—a result of Gül frequently kicking Erdoğan's leg to keep him from boiling over. In addition, at least in the early days, two further individuals were part of what was in effect a quadrumvirate that ran the government. Bülent Arınc, the perhaps most outspoken Islamist ideologue in the ruling elite, was speaker of Parliament; and in the initial phases of the government, Deputy Prime Minister Abdüllatif Şener was another member of the ruling team. Şener, however, was the first to be alienated from key decisions.

2005-2007: Consolidation of Power— The Battle for the Presidency

From 2005 to 2007, the AKP's interest in the EU cooled considerably while it focused its attention on consolidating power. In fact, Erdoğan only reluctantly accepted the conditions that the EU set for beginning negotiations with Turkey, and the talks that led the EU to give a conditional green light ended on a rather sour note.¹²⁴ Once Turkey had secured the beginning of accession negotiations, the logical next step was to further redouble the pace of reform in order to try and “close” the 30-plus “chapters” or areas in which Turkish legislation and government practices needed to be brought in conformity with EU laws and regulations.

Far from that, the exact opposite happened: The AKP's interest in the harmonization process dissipated. This impasse is often blamed on the EU, and particularly on those EU leaders—French, German, and Austrian in particular—who had resorted to the argument that Turkey was not a European country because of its Muslim religion. While that certainly had an impact, these were not new arguments, and if Turkey really wanted to secure EU membership, it irrevocably had the path of achieving that objective by advancing the arduous process of bringing its domestic system in line with the EU. Moreover, Turkey faced an environment where the current EU leaders were relatively positively disposed toward Turkey, but were likely to be replaced by more skeptical forces. This would seem to suggest a powerful incentive to achieve as much as

possible on EU accession while that opportunity lasted.

Clearly, more was at play. Leading AKP figures appeared to lose faith in the extent to which Europe was useful to its domestic agenda. This was true particularly for the headscarf issue, and more broadly the AKP's hope of using the rhetoric of democratic rights and individual freedoms to break down the restrictions on religion in Turkey's secularist system. An important case in point was *Leyla Şahin vs. Turkey*, a case before the European Court of Human Rights in which a female university student prohibited from attending university with an Islamic headscarf sued Turkey, arguing (as the AKP leadership did) that the headscarf ban violated her human rights. But in a near-unanimous verdict handed down in June 2004, the European Court upheld the headscarf ban as conforming to European standards. Furthermore, also in 2004, EU officials reacted strongly against AKP efforts to criminalize adultery, eventually forcing the government to withdraw the proposal.¹²⁵ These factors contributed to lead AKP leaders to conclude that Europe was not a reliable proxy in their efforts to confront Turkey's secular state establishment. The AKP had successfully used the carrot of EU accession toward achieving one of its main goals, that of removing the military from politics. As the battle for power turned inward, Europe was not as relevant anymore, nor was it a reliable ally for the AKP.

Indeed, during this period the AKP focused on consolidating its position at home. The big prize was asserting control over the presidency. Turkey is often termed a parliamentary republic, and its presidency "symbolic." But this ignores the fact that the president has considerable powers. After 2014, Erdoğan would use these to their maximum potential, as they include, not least, the power to block laws and personnel appointments, as well as the president's role in the National Security Council and in nominating judges. Therefore, the AKP's lack of control over the presidency was an important impediment preventing the party from freely setting the country's agenda.

Seen from the point of view of the republican establishment, the

presidency was both a pulpit and a bulwark that ensured a form of checks and balances that prevented the AKP from taking over the state entirely. As the 2007 presidential elections approached, therefore, it became a major point of contention, much more so than earlier in Turkish modern history.

The AKP faced a choice that, in retrospect, was a turning point. It could nominate a highly partisan and polarizing figure with a staunch Islamist background or a person from within its own ranks with a secular background. If the AKP nominated Erdoğan, Gül, or Arınc, all of whom came from the *Milli Görüş* tradition, that was understood to indicate its ambition to assert control over the state. If it nominated somebody from its own ranks with a more secular background, like then-Defense Minister Vecdi Gönül, that would have indicated a willingness to compromise and the AKP's respect for the fears of the country's secular population. The most symbolically laden issue was whether the spouse of the nominee wore an Islamic headscarf; Gönül's wife did not, while those of Erdoğan, Arınc and Gül did.

By the spring of 2007, it became obvious that the AKP would nominate a candidate emanating from the Islamist movement. In response, a broad opposing bloc emerged within the secular parts of Turkish society, both in the Parliament and in society at large, to try to prevent this from happening. The most ardently secular opponents of the AKP held large-scale "Republican" demonstrations of a magnitude unprecedented in the history of modern Turkey. When the AKP ignored these protests and moved ahead to nominate Abdullah Gül, the CHP boycotted the vote in Parliament—making the legally far-fetched argument that, without their participation, the Parliament lacked a quorum, invalidating the vote. The same evening, the General Staff—which had been told by Erdoğan that the party would nominate Gönül—issued a memorandum on its website, declaring itself a party to the dispute and the supreme defender of Turkish secularism. Four days later, the Constitutional Court upheld the CHP's petition, leading the AKP to call early parliamentary elections.

This episode did provide an indication of the AKP's intentions, but the AKP leadership also showed its ability to turn a defeat into a victory. Erdoğan met privately with the chief of the General Staff in Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul to calm tensions, and the AKP instilled a sense that it had been wronged among large tracts of the population. Coupled with its successful economic policies and the ineptitude of the opposition, this enabled it to secure a decisive victory in July 2007, capturing 46 percent of the vote. The next Parliament included a third party, the socially conservative Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), whose decision to attend the parliamentary vote helped the AKP secure the presidency. This episode set the stage for an epic battle between the AKP and the republican establishment.

2007-2010: Fighting the “Old Guard”

In February 2008, the AKP succeeded in gaining the MHP's support to pass a constitutional amendment that liberalized the restrictions on the Islamic headscarf. The next month, the Chief Public Prosecutor launched an indictment to close the AKP on grounds of violating the separation of religion and state. This indictment narrowly failed in July 2008, when the Supreme Court voted 6 to 5 to ban the party—whereas seven votes were needed to convict.¹²⁶ This indictment was another turning point because it ended the tense but peaceful coexistence between the AKP and the secular establishment. On one hand, it augured a “fight to the death” over control of the state, but it also changed the political balances in the country. In 2007, the AKP realized that it had stared down the Turkish military and prevailed. When it managed to survive the closure case, the AKP leadership now felt that they might just be able to subdue the secular establishment and gain unfettered control.¹²⁷

This formed the backdrop for the assault on the secular establishment, discussed in detail below. It also provided the grounds for the tighter tactical alliance between the AKP and the Gülen movement, which had never supported the parties of political Islam prior to 2002, instead providing tacit support to the center-

right parties that were friendly toward Islamic social movements. Having a strong Turkish nationalist streak, they supported the state, maintained a healthy distance to Erdoğan, and focused their efforts on developing their educational and business endeavors as well as providing cadres to the Turkish bureaucracy.

Yet in 2002, that changed: The Gülen movement lent support to the AKP, as could be seen from the editorial lines of Gülen-affiliated media outlets and organizations. But, crucially, the Gülen movement—a network rather than a hierarchical organization—never integrated with the AKP, maintaining its autonomy from the ruling party. For example, its media outlets supported the AKP, but were never under the ownership of AKP-affiliated individuals. This support grew into a tactical alliance in 2007 because the Gülen movement shared the same adversary: the secular establishment. Traditionally supportive of the state, the Gülen movement had been heavily hit by the 1997 military intervention—at least, that is what its members felt. It was after that intervention that Gülen was forced into exile and many Gülenists were purged from government offices or otherwise harassed at the time. The movement, therefore, did not see the 2007 military memorandum and the ensuing closure case to be directed only at the AKP. They saw the risk of a repeat of the post-1997 events, but with the crucial difference that together with the AKP, they now had a fighting chance to push back. Thus, Gülen-affiliated prosecutors launched the Ergenekon and Balyoz investigations, discussed in detail below, in close coordination with the AKP political leadership, and with Erdoğan's personal blessing.

The Muzzling of the Press

The mainstream media had maintained a positive attitude toward the AKP during its first term. The only real exception was the staunch secularist newspaper Cumhuriyet, which nevertheless has a very small circulation, reaching urban secular elites rather than the masses. But this changed after the 2007 presidential election. When mainstream media outlets began to voice criticism of the AKP's unilateralist policies, Erdoğan went on to publicly rebuke

them.¹²⁸ The SDIF was then used to seize the country's second-largest media group, Sabah/ATV, which was auctioned off in a single-bidder auction (financed by state banks and Qatari funds) to the Çalık energy company, whose media wing was run by Erdoğan's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak.¹²⁹

Erdoğan's outbursts grew stronger as secular-minded media outlets criticized the 2008 constitutional amendment that opened the way for greater wearing of the Islamic veil and covered serious allegations of corruption involving an AKP-affiliated charity in Germany, the Deniz Feneri.¹³⁰ Erdoğan's outbursts against journalists and media owners became commonplace, and, in turn, media owners and editors rapidly reverted to a form of self-censorship. Gradually, a disturbing pattern emerged of journalists being fired after having been publicly criticized by Erdoğan. Five years later, numerous telephone conversations leaked on the internet would provide graphic examples of how Erdoğan had made it a practice to personally telephone leading editors to castigate negative coverage of various AKP initiatives.¹³¹

Erdoğan then took on the country's largest media group, Doğan Media (DMG), after it ramped up its reporting on the Deniz Feneri case, which implicated figures close to Erdoğan in siphoning off millions from charities to fund pro-AKP media outlets in Turkey.¹³² Erdoğan repeatedly urged his supporters to boycott all DMG-owned newspapers and TV stations. Tax authorities then slammed DMG with fines totaling almost \$3 billion.¹³³ As a result, Turkey has fallen like a stone on Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index. In 2008, Turkey was in 102nd place of 173 countries; it was 138th of 178 countries in 2010, and 149th of 180 countries in 2015.¹³⁴

The Purging of the Old Guard

The centerpiece of the onslaught on the establishment was the "Ergenekon" indictments, which argued that a diverse collection of opponents of the AKP and the Gülen movement had conspired to overthrow the government. This "Ergenekon Terrorist Organization"

allegedly consisted of fringe nationalist groups as well as retired and serving military officers. The indictments initially had some plausibility because of the well-known collusion in the 1990s between the state and organized crime and the existence of death squads deployed against supporters of the PKK. Therefore, Turkey's liberals and many foreign observers saw the indictments as a much-needed opportunity to rid Turkey of shady connections from the past, similar to Italy's early 1990s *mani pulite* investigation.

Yet it soon became clear that something entirely different was going on. Prosecutors went on to arrest over 200 suspects, including university rectors, activists from nongovernmental organizations, and journalists, and rapidly overstepped their boundaries.¹³⁵ No evidence emerged to suggest that crimes had been committed by many if not most of the suspects, who went on to spend months and sometimes years in detention without being formally charged with any crime.¹³⁶ The indictments, running in the thousands of pages, defied reason: they actually accused the supposed "Ergenekon" terrorist organization—whose very existence has yet to be proven—of having masterminded every single act of political violence in Turkey's modern history.¹³⁷ Moreover, the indictments included deep inconsistencies and internal contradictions, as well as instances where evidence had clearly been manipulated.¹³⁸ To make matters worse, evidence from the investigation was systematically leaked to the pro-AKP press.¹³⁹ The investigation's effect—and probably its intent—was to create a climate of fear among the opponents of the AKP and Islamic conservatism.¹⁴⁰

The indictments were not initially understood to be linked to the Gülen movement, but subsequent arrest waves specifically targeted opponents of the Gülen network. For example, in August 2010, prosecutors arrested Hanefi Avcı, a local police chief that had at one point been sympathetic to the Gülen movement, but who had published a book in 2009 that accused the Gülen network of manipulating judicial processes and appointments.¹⁴¹ In February and March 2011, nine journalists were targeted. The first to be

arrested were four employees of the opposition Oda TV network, who were about to broadcast footage implicating police officers in planting evidence on suspects in the Ergenekon investigation. In March, very unlikely members of the supposed terrorist organization were arrested: Nedim Şener had won international awards for his reporting on the alleged involvement of security forces in the numerous political assassinations in Turkey over the past two decades; and Ahmet Şık had just completed a book, still unpublished, on the Gülen movement's increasing dominance over the police force. Both were sentenced to lengthy jail sentences.¹⁴²

The attack on the “old guard” was ultimately successful. Having called the military's bluff in 2007, the AKP-Gülen alliance was able to neutralize and demoralize the military brass and the staunchest secularist circles in Turkey.

The Ergenekon trials were limited largely to intellectuals, journalists, and retired military officers. They were followed by a direct attack on the military: the Balyoz (Sledgehammer) indictment, which alleged that the military leadership had organized a seminar in March 2003 as part of a plan to provoke military incidents with Greece, simulate a radical Islamist takeover of the country, bomb mosques in Istanbul, and use these incidents as a pretext to overthrow the government.¹⁴³ But the indictment was not only improbable, it also featured clearly fabricated evidence. As was typical with these indictments, they originated from materials anonymously delivered to the fiercely anti-military newspaper Taraf, in this case including a CD purporting to include classified military documents. Yet computer forensics showed the documents, purportedly written in 2003, were written on Microsoft Windows 2007—the beta version of which was available only in 2006. This evidence of forgery was ignored by the courts and vigorously denied by pro-AKP and Gülenist media. A total of 250 military officers were sentenced to lengthy jail sentences.

As Gareth Jenkins has noted, these indictments, along with several other cases, followed the same pattern:

“In what has now become their hallmark, each case has begun with an anonymous tipoff, followed by the ‘discovery’ of allegedly incriminating digital documents, prodigiously long indictments and febrile campaigns of distortion and disinformation in media organs controlled by or affiliated with the Gülen movement. The military has been the main target ... The only characteristic that the other targets of the cases share is that they are all perceived opponents or rivals of Islamic conservatism in general or the Gülen Movement in particular. In addition to forgery and fabrication, there is also evidence of Gülen sympathizers planting ‘incriminating’ material on suspects, including sometimes in the wrong premises after mixing up addresses.”¹⁴⁴

These means managed to subdue the military, but also showed that the Gülen movement's infiltration of the state bureaucracy had reached very high levels, especially in the judiciary. That process was, however, not complete. Between 2008 and 2013, the outcome of court decisions in Turkey was truly unpredictable: Some judges and prosecutors were members of the republican establishment, others were Gülenist. The only thing they had in common was their politicization. One court could issue a verdict one day, and another could overturn it the next, depending on the proclivities of the judges and prosecutors in question.

The AKP-Gülenist alliance dealt with this problem in simple way: They remade the entire judiciary. As two analysts wrote in 2007, “the AKP is likely to cloak any reforms it sponsors in terms of deepening democracy and adapting to European Union standards—a rhetoric that will be certain to please Europeans, appease Americans and placate internal opposition.”¹⁴⁵

And so it was with the 2010 constitutional referendum. It included a smorgasbord of small, positive steps to lead Turkey closer to EU standards, but the most potent items were those that remade the country's key judicial institutions, namely the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), which oversees the promotion and appointment processes of judges

and prosecutors. By broadening membership in these institutions, the AKP ensured that it ended the control of the old state elites over the judiciary. And while that, on paper, made them more democratic, in practice it meant that the AKP gained control over them, since the AKP president and AKP prime minister were able to appoint a majority of members. In a move typical of the AKP's attitude to the EU, the government chose to incorporate only those European recommendations that suited its purposes while ignoring those that did not. The EU had recommended both increasing the size of the HSYK and removing the minister and undersecretary of justice from the body. The former served the AKP's interests, but the latter did not. So, naturally, the AKP accepted the former recommendation and ignored the latter.¹⁴⁶

The referendum filled one purpose: vanquishing the republican establishment. With the military defeated and the judiciary subdued, the *ancien régime* of Turkey was essentially dead. There were no longer any bureaucratic checks and balances on the Islamic conservative movement. But the move was inconclusive because its primary beneficiary was the Gülen movement, not the AKP. In fact, the AKP had few followers in the judiciary, not least since its core demographic, followers of the Naqshbandi order, were not widely represented among graduates of law schools, let alone in the judiciary. By contrast, the Gülen movement had managed to grow to a position of considerable influence among judges and prosecutors. With then-President Gül and then-Prime Minister Erdoğan in a position to appoint new individuals to key judiciary positions, the only candidates with an Islamic conservative background they could choose from were essentially those close to the Gülen movement. This would lay the ground for the coming clash between the two.

In this second term of the AKP, an important development was Erdoğan's emergence as the sole and undisputed leader of the government and party. Most importantly, because Gül was elected president, he was removed from day-to-day politics. Arınç also fell out with Erdoğan and spent five years in the cold before returning

as deputy prime minister.¹⁴⁷ This left Erdoğan in sole command of the party.

Already in 2008, the change in leadership style was visible. Gone was the Erdoğan who patiently allowed debate even on small issues. Instead, another Erdoğan appeared, one increasingly intolerant to criticism and deaf to advice and debate, whether inside or outside the party. Observers noted that most AKP deputies lacked the courage to demand an appointment with Erdoğan. Party group meetings were turned into a private stage for Erdoğan, and deputies were not expected to speak or ask questions.¹⁴⁸ The same pattern developed in the council of ministers. This shed considerable doubt on the practical implications of Erdoğan's much-heralded inclusion of liberal candidates in the party lists for the 2007 elections: They entirely lacked influence over government policy and were mainly window-dressing.

2011-2013: Arab Upheavals and Dreams of Glory

The next period of AKP rule began with the June 2011 parliamentary election, in which the AKP managed to secure 49.9 percent of the vote. This victory occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia, followed by Egypt, Syria, and Libya. The role of the Arab upheavals is treated separately below, but they served to convince Erdoğan and the AKP that they were on the right side of history and confirmed the ideological conviction that their "cause" was coming to fruition. Believing that he had now decisively vanquished the "old guard" and had Turkey firmly in his hand, Erdoğan embarked on a twin voyage: legitimizing one-man rule through the introduction of a presidential constitution while simultaneously asserting Turkey's leadership of the Middle East. In retrospect, it is clear that this is the point at which Erdoğan's reach began to exceed his grasp.

By April 2010, if not sooner, Erdoğan had set his eyes set on the post of president —but not under Turkey's semi-presidential system of government; he declared his interest in a new political

system. His appetite was whetted by the victories in the September 2010 referendum and the June 2011 parliamentary elections.¹⁴⁹ Having succeeded in removing the threat to his power posed by the secular establishment in the military and the judiciary, he had the opportunity to usher in a more liberal order, as he had promised. Yet he chose a different path: an effort to single-mindedly concentrate as much power as possible into his own hands.

In so doing, he rapidly changed the main fault line in Turkish politics. Gone was the traditional Islamic-secularist divide; the struggle was now between advocates and opponents of one-man rule. This also meant that a fault line was opened *within* the Islamic conservative movement itself. Indeed, the movement was far from united behind the idea of Erdoğan as a strongman and president for a further decade. These ambitions caused a rift between Erdoğan and Gül. More consequentially, they were a direct cause of the Islamic civil war between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement.

The upcoming presidential election was crucial to Erdoğan because the amended Turkish constitution now directed, for the first time, that the Turkish president be selected by popular vote—and thus carry a substantial public mandate. Paradoxically, this time Erdoğan's main obstacle was not the military or the judiciary, but his long-time comrade, Abdullah Gül. When the constitution was amended in late 2007 it provided for a five year, rather than seven year, term and provided an option for a second term but did not address the question of whether or not the incumbent president would serve under the old or new system. Thus, no one knew whether Gül's term would end in 2012 or in 2014, or whether he could be re-elected. Erdoğan, never a man of patience, did not want to wait: He purged Gül supporters from the party ranks ahead of the 2011 elections and made his first move against Gül in January 2012 by having Parliament pass a law binding Gül to the old rules, implying he could not stand for re-election. But the same summer, the Constitutional Court (now with a number of Gül appointees) ruled that Gül's term was seven years and that he could be re-elected for a further five-year term. This indicated that

Erdoğan was not in control of the courts and shrank the space for compromise between the two men.

Gül then began to emphasize the contrast between his vision for Turkey and Erdoğan's. Where Erdoğan became increasingly authoritarian, Gül made himself the spokesman of further democratization and reform¹⁵⁰ Where Erdoğan veered further away from Turkey's European integration—suggesting that Turkey should join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization because it was “stronger” than the EU and “shares values” with Turkey—Gül emerged as the spokesman of Turkey's continued European vocation. A chasm opened between Gül and Erdoğan advisors, who frequently castigated the other side in the presence of foreigners. Gül and his advisors also built a political group, consisting mainly of former Gül advisors and center-right politicians, that they may yet use to provide a base for the former president to return to politics. However, it should be noted that Turkish and foreign observers alike held out high hopes for Gül to put the brakes on Erdoğan, but were repeatedly disappointed while he held the highest office in the land. It appears clear that Gül has lacked either the courage or the will to break with Erdoğan, a fact that has been directly relevant in facilitating Erdoğan's power grab.

The rift with the Gülenists proved far more consequential. Erdoğan's AKP and the Gülen movement always disagreed on a number of issues, both domestic and international. One area was foreign affairs. The Gülen movement had expanded its horizons beyond Turkey and became globalized, making it increasingly sensitive to the broader balances and nuances of world politics—in sharp contrast to the narrow mindset characterizing the *Milli Görüş* movement. The Gülen movement stands out for the absence of the anti-Western, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic reflexes that are prevalent among Islamic political groups worldwide, including the core AKP. This divergence first became visible following the 2010 Gaza flotilla incident, when Gülen, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, made clear his disapproval of the flotilla initiative. The Gülen movement also strongly disapproved of the AKP's efforts

to improve ties with Iran. (It is no coincidence that the December 2013 corruption scandal, believed to be initiated by Gülen-linked prosecutors, targeted the Iranian money laundering activities of the AKP government.) These attitudes are not unanimously shared within the movement, and even if its worldview is less obscurantist, that should not be taken as evidence of a democratic outlook. Indeed, the movement's authoritarian impulses have been on prominent display, as has its willingness to traffic in far-fetched conspiracies to undermine its political opponents.

The most salient bone of contention, however, was the Kurdish question. The Gülenists were markedly less willing than the AKP leadership to compromise on the country's unitary structure and the primacy of the Turkish language. Indeed, the trigger for the rift between the two was Gülenist opposition to the AKP's peace talks with the PKK. The main underlying cause of the declining relationship, however, was clearly Erdoğan's personal ambitions. The rise of the Gülen movement's influence in the judiciary gradually began to rattle Erdoğan, who did not want to share power with Gülen any more than he wanted to share power with the generals.

Thus, Erdoğan purged Gülen supporters from party lists in the 2011 elections and used a public administration reform to remove or circulate Gülenists in the state bureaucracy. By late 2011, the battle lines were drawn. Columnists close to Gülen warned Erdoğan of the consequences of his "arrogance," and on November 23, the Gülenist daily *Zaman* published a full-page article by Gülen himself on the concept of arrogance. Erdoğan was not mentioned by name, but the message was clear.¹⁵¹ In February 2012, a prosecutor sought to arrest Erdoğan's intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, over his role in the negotiations with the PKK. Erdoğan responded by conducting further purges of Gülen followers in the bureaucracy, while Gülenist media outlets grew openly critical of the government.

Thus, during this period, Erdoğan's personal ambitions became a key issue in Turkish politics, especially the informal politics within the Islamic movement. Key constituencies in his own Islamic

movement opposed the move and, as will be seen, they combined to thwart Erdoğan's ambitions.

In parallel, Erdoğan's rhetoric turned bolder and more overbearing from late 2011 onward. The 2011 election campaign was based almost exclusively on Erdoğan's person. Having won 50 percent of the vote, Erdoğan seemed to conclude he had a personal mandate to rule Turkey as he saw fit. He began to return to the radicalism of his youth, exhibiting strong Islamist tendencies that had been absent or suppressed for close to a decade, including engaging in frequent emotional diatribes on social issues. He vowed to raise "pious generations"; urged women to have at least three children; and issued plans to outlaw abortion and cesarean sections, as well as to reintroduce capital punishment. In spring 2012, he pledged allegiance to "one nation, one flag, one religion, one state." As Gareth Jenkins has observed, "Erdoğan appears to regard himself as the embodiment of the national will—with the result that his tastes, prejudices and opinions become those of the nation, regardless of whether or not the nation is aware of the fact."¹⁵²

Erdoğan himself summed up the rationale behind his interest in this broad range of issues: "I am the country's Prime Minister. Every issue is my concern."¹⁵³ The reasons behind this personal journey remain debated. To some, power went to Erdoğan's head; others speculated that his health and a sense of imminent mortality were the explanation; to others, he was simply returning to being the politician he once was, implying that his caution and moderation from 2001 to 2008 were mainly tactical. Indeed, there is a direct correlation between Erdoğan's consolidation of power and the resurgence of his authoritarian and Islamist pronouncements.

Erdoğan also developed an increasingly conspiratorial worldview. His increasingly frequent outbursts against imagined foreign foes whom he blames for Turkey's problems is often viewed as tactical, but there is substantial reason to believe that Erdoğan and his key advisors truly believe in many of the conspiracy theories they peddle, particularly those involving world Jewry. To note but one example, Erdoğan in 2013 hired Yiğit Bulut as a chief advisor, a

person best known for his pronouncement that people around the world were trying to kill Erdoğan using telekinesis.¹⁵⁴

As noted above, another element to consider is the state of Erdoğan's health, which went through a time of crisis in 2011-2012. In November 2011 and February 2012, he underwent two complex surgeries that, according to the official version, removed a benign growth on his colon. Informed sources reveal that a third surgery took place in April 2013. There is a widespread consensus that Erdoğan underwent treatment for colon cancer. While he has rejected these notions, a video clip on a visit to a hospital in Adana in May 2012 shows Erdoğan telling a woman receiving colon cancer treatment that "we share the same illness."¹⁵⁵ This weak health undoubtedly created a vacuum that contributed to the power struggles that accelerated in 2012, and also in all likelihood slowed the attempts to introduce a presidential system. Since 2013, his health has visibly improved.

2013-2015: The Islamic Civil War: Dueling Authoritarians?

From the summer of 2013, the tide began to turn against Erdoğan and his presidential ambitions. The Gezi Park protests showed the extent of popular frustration among the urban middle classes; but most importantly, his government's heavy-handed response to the protests robbed Erdoğan of his international standing. This was followed by the considerable blow dealt by Gülenist-driven efforts to indict four government ministers and the leakage of amounts of incriminating information on Erdoğan's corruption and crony capitalist ways, including his family's apparent hoarding of cash in various residences. Erdoğan did manage to eke out a victory in the 2014 local elections and the subsequent presidential vote, but eventually suffered his first major electoral defeat in June 2015, when his party lost its majority in Parliament.

The Gezi uprising began as a protest against the planned destruction of one of Istanbul's few remaining green areas, the Gezi Park in Istanbul's Taksim Square. When the protests were crushed with surprising brutality, and Erdoğan enraged large sections of

the population by his demeaning words about the protesters, they mushroomed into a nationwide phenomenon. Significantly, the protests were not against the AKP or against Islamic conservatism; they were against Erdoğan personally, as well as against the increasingly brazen corruption of his regime, which many observers say has drastically increased since 2010-2011.¹⁵⁶

The accumulated frustration with Erdoğan was exacerbated by police brutality during the Gezi protests, carried out at Erdoğan's direct orders. Gezi also exposed the rifts within the AKP, which would grow further over time. While then-President Gül and Deputy Prime Minister Arıncı were trying to calm feelings, Erdoğan repeatedly overruled them with his harsh and unrepentant rhetoric, every time followed by brutal crackdowns on protesters, providing new fuel to a protest movement that may otherwise have begun to dissipate. Erdoğan rallied large crowds of his own while taking every opportunity to blame the unrest on a wide conspiracy involving unnamed foreign powers, the international media, and the "interest rate lobby," intended to weaken Turkey. His main loyalist newspaper, *Yeni Şafak*, extended the conspiracy to right-wing American think tanks, The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and the Jewish lobby more generally.

Gezi helped accelerate the conflict with the Gülen movement. Gülen-affiliated media stood out by reporting fairly and critically about government repression of the protests. The movement's official mouthpiece, the Writers' and Journalists' Union, has since issued several statements featuring sharp criticism of the government's restrictions on freedom of expression. In Erdoğan's conspiratorial mindset, the Gülen movement was seen as complicit in "planning" and organizing these protests, at the behest of the global forces, especially the Jewish world conspiracy that Erdoğan sees as plotting his downfall. Of course, it should be noted that the Gülenist media resorted to arguments of democracy and due process when they were themselves targeted by Erdoğan. By contrast, they had eagerly egged on the miscarriages of justice that were the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials.

Any remnants of civility ended in November 2013, when Erdoğan sought to pass a bill to close down the private preparatory schools that help Turkish students prepare for the centralized university entrance examination. The Gülen movement operates up to a third of the estimated 4,000 cramming schools, which are an important recruiting tool for the movement. It is in these schools that many, if not most, of the movement's past, present, and future followers have been identified and cultivated. The move was a transparent attack on the Gülen movement, and the movement correctly interpreted it as the first step in Erdoğan's plan to finish off the movement's influence in Turkey. This, in turn, prompted Gülenist prosecutors to launch the arrest wave on December 17, 2013, which targeted four of Erdoğan's closest cabinet members.

The dragnet that landed 52 persons in jail included two separate tracks. One was a money-laundering scheme designed to circumvent the Iranian sanctions regime, involving millions of dollars in bribes to the ministers of economy, interior, and European affairs, as well as the CEO of state-run Halkbank; the other featured probes into illegalities in large-scale construction projects in Istanbul and targeted the minister of environment and urban planning and a major construction mogul close to Erdoğan.¹⁵⁷ On December 25, the four ministers accused of wrongdoing were removed in a cabinet shakeup. Erdoğan reacted by a vast and immediate purge of the judiciary and police bodies. Within hours, he replaced dozens of police chiefs involved in the probe and appointed additional, loyal prosecutors; in the following months, thousands would be rotated, fired, or arrested. By December 25, the government had thwarted a second wave of the corruption probe by taking the extraordinary move of instructing police not to implement the arrest orders provided by prosecutors. This second probe included the Erdoğan's son, Bilal, who was being indicted for having facilitated shady deals involving Saudi businessman Yasin al-Qadi, an alleged al-Qaeda financier who remains a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" under U.S. law.¹⁵⁸

A closer analysis suggests that the probes were carefully selected

to inflict a maximum of damage to Erdoğan's legitimacy, both at home and abroad. In particular, it is no coincidence that they highlighted Erdoğan's connections to unsavory regimes and elements abroad. As if allegations of Iranian sanctions-busting and collusion with terrorist financiers were not enough, a further scandal ensued when police in southern Turkey stopped a truck carrying weapons into Syria. The provincial governor halted the probe, thereby revealing that the shipment was run by Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MİT), and thus lent credence to long-standing claims of Turkish support for Jihadi groups in Syria. The corruption probes thus cemented Western suspicions of Erdoğan's collusion with anti-Western regimes and Islamic extremists, further weakening Western support for his government.

Of course, the crisis also drew attention to the role of the Gülen movement in the state. Erdoğan's ambitions forced the movement's hand and prompted it to come out to fight first to safeguard its position in the state bureaucracy, and ultimately for its survival. Nonetheless, as a result, the movement can no longer plausibly claim to be a nonpolitical force solely engaged in civil society.

Erdoğan reacted by furiously attacking the Gülen movement, calling it a "criminal gang" within the state controlled by Turkey's enemies, especially the Jewish world conspiracy, and that needed to be eliminated. Since then, official Turkish sources refer to the movement as the "parallel state." This conflict became a deadly struggle in which Erdoğan gradually succeeded in halting the movement's role in the government bureaucracy. Yet he paid an enormous price for it as the reality of his government's and party's corruption became common knowledge.

Paradoxically, however, Erdoğan did not suffer the consequences until he had largely defeated the Gülen movement. As long as the movement continued to be seen as a powerful and opaque force behind the scenes, many Turks seemed to prefer Erdoğan to an opaque movement that was neither elected nor accountable, and which visibly had spent years collecting incriminating information—including by tapping the telephones of the country's

highest officials. This helps explain why the large-scale internet leaks of incriminating information did not lead to a massive AKP defeat in the April 2014 local elections, or the presidential vote later that year. But once the Gülen movement had been cut down to size through widespread purges, voters in June 2015 appear to have trained their eyes on Erdoğan, whose quest for personal power was continuing unabashed. Paradoxically, therefore, Erdoğan's efforts to eradicate the Gülen movement helped usher in his own defeat. Similarly, the Gülen movement could take some credit for taking Erdoğan down from his pedestal. But it was able to do so only by effectively destroying its own position in Turkey, including in the court of public opinion—as well as in many neighboring countries, where the movement's claims to be a nonpolitical force were met with growing skepticism.

The Islamic civil war once again reshaped Turkish politics. Most significantly, in a remarkable reversal for a prime minister who prided himself on forcing the military back to its barracks, Erdoğan reached out to the General Staff to find an ally against the Gülen movement. This led to an unlikely and unholy alliance with the same army that he had only recently defeated with the aid and assistance of the Gülenists. In the process, this meant freeing hundreds of civilians and officers who had been sentenced to long jail sentences in the Ergenekon and Balyoz investigations. Erdoğan went so far as to openly admit his mistake and implicitly apologized to the military in a speech to the military academy, claiming he had been tricked by the Gülenist prosecutors. This claim is quite disingenuous given the determination with which he supported their purges of the military establishment; more likely, Erdoğan wanted to discredit *any* Gülenist-linked accusations, thereby also exonerating his own family and close circles targeted by the December 2013 probes—the difference is that there was much more convincing evidence in those cases than in any of the cases used to send the old guard to jail.¹⁵⁹

The Gezi Park protests and the December 2013 corruption probe may seem quite different. However, they were part of the same

political process—a reaction from various parts of Turkish society to the growing autocratic tendencies of Erdoğan's rule, as well as its ever more blatant corruption. In both instances, Erdoğan's opponents very specifically targeted Erdoğan, and his autocratic and arbitrary exercise of power. Moreover, Erdoğan's reaction was similar. In both instances, Erdoğan made stunning miscalculations that worsened his predicament. He repeatedly poured fuel on the Gezi fire with his harsh and degrading statements, which one former AKP parliamentarian privately called “a textbook case of how not to handle a crisis.” Following the corruption probe, he exhibited the bad judgment to hold onto the ministers accused of wrongdoing for far too long; even when confronted with Prime Minister Davutoğlu's desire to send them to trial ahead of the June 2015 elections, Erdoğan refused. On both occasions, Erdoğan also showed how dangerously conspiratorial and paranoid his worldview had become. After Gezi, he conjured up an “interest rate lobby,” including open references to the Jewish world conspiracy. The corruption probe simply led him to lump the Gülen movement with this vast conspiracy.

Erdoğan's response to the corruption probes and ensuing leaks was to marshal the government's powers in a heavy-handed attempt to quash both the corruption charges and the public opposition. Not only have hundreds of prosecutors and thousands of police officers tied to the graft investigation been fired or reassigned, but the media has been blocked from reporting on it.¹⁶⁰ Not content with these measures, Erdoğan's government undertook a legislative campaign to vastly increase the state's power and insulate it from accountability. The AKP submitted a slew of bills, and passed several of them, which sought to fundamentally transform the functioning of critical state institutions. The most consequential of these bills dealt with the structure and functioning of the judiciary, government control over the Internet, and the mandate and powers of the intelligence service.¹⁶¹

The judicial amendments relate to the HSYK, the administrative heart of Turkey's judicial system. The law passed essentially

placed the courts under the control of the executive branch. Then-President Gül managed to prevent language that would have given the minister of justice sole authority to make appointments to HSYK, but the law still significantly enhanced the justice minister's authority. He was made responsible for calling HSYK meetings and setting their agendas, selecting members for positions within the body, and appointing the inspectors who probe judges and prosecutors for misconduct. Critics and legal scholars charge that investing a member of the Cabinet with such powers violates the principle of judicial independence enshrined in Turkey's constitution.¹⁶² In April 2014, the Constitutional Court indeed overturned several provision of the law, particularly those relating to the role assigned to the justice minister.¹⁶³

Laws passed in 2014 also granted the government sweeping powers to censor and monitor the Internet with minimal oversight. The country's Internet-regulating body, the Presidency of Telecommunication and Communication (TİB), gained the authority to demand that service providers block any content deemed to be a violation of privacy. The power to block offending content appears to extend not just to websites where the content appears, but to the entire service or server hosting the content. It was under this interpretation of the new law that TİB acted to block access to Twitter on March 20, 2015.¹⁶⁴ This move was also reversed by the Constitutional Court. However, much of the law stands, including requirements for Internet service providers to maintain records of all users' online activity for two years and to provide it to the government upon request. A last-minute amendment to the law added a layer of judicial review, but the law allows the government to act before seeking court approval within 24 hours.¹⁶⁵ Of course, court approval may not matter anyway, as the court that would review such government action would be selected by HSYK.

A third law expanded the purview of the MİT, while simultaneously shielding it from prosecution and adding stiffer penalties for journalists reporting on its activities. The bill, signed into law by President Gül, gave the agency, which was previously limited to

carrying out intelligence-gathering and counter-intelligence duties, the mandate to conduct loosely defined operations in the name of national security. The bill allows the MİT to conduct wiretapping of phone calls and grants it the power to demand access to any data or information held by any organization or institution in Turkey, private or public. These new powers were designed to cover activities that the MİT already appeared to be involved in, such as providing arms to radical extremist groups in Syria and negotiating with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK).¹⁶⁶ This law also put in place extraordinary legal protections for those working for and with the MİT. Prosecutors would be required to notify the agency of any complaints that are filed against it, but would be barred from taking up such investigations. Any prosecution of an MİT agent—whether for crimes committed in their official or personal capacities—would be moved to a special court, to be designated by HSYK. Meanwhile, the law created stiff penalties for any media outlet that reports on any aspect of the MİT or its activities.

On their own, each of these laws might appear worrisome but not catastrophic. Taken together, they create a self-referential and self-validating system of societal control and are a clear indication of the direction in which Erdoğan is taking Turkey.

The laws on Internet regulation and the expansion of MİT powers maintain the patina of legitimacy by including a layer of judicial review. But since judges and courts are politically selected, and unlikely to arrive at independent conclusions about the legality of government actions, the notion of court oversight is an illusion. With the appointment, promotion, sanctioning, and dismissal of judges now effectively controlled by one member of the Cabinet, the prime minister's office has gained the tools, if not to dictate the administration of justice directly, then at least to coerce judicial compliance. This eliminates one of the most important checks and balances on government power.

Motivated by the goal of impeding the progress of corruption investigations into his inner circle, Erdoğan is succeeding in restructuring the Turkish state. These legal changes, if allowed

to stand, will have far-reaching implications for the future of democracy in Turkey and be much harder to undo than Erdoğan's previous power grabs. As long as Turkey remains a democracy, and the people can choose a new government, sidelined politicians can be rehabilitated, unjustly jailed opponents can be released, and silenced journalists can regain their voices. But the ability of the voters to make free and informed choices is growing increasingly limited as the government expands its ability to define unacceptable speech and punish it.

The Rise and Fall of the Islamic-Turkish-Kurdish Synthesis

In response to the mounting evidence of the AKP's authoritarian turn, observers in both Europe and the United States often retort that for all of Erdoğan's flaws, he has had a tremendously positive effect on Turkey's most significant political issue: the Kurdish problem.¹⁶⁷ And while Erdoğan's policies indeed had that effect before his decision to abruptly end the peace process in June 2015, his various moves on the Kurdish issue appear to have been motivated more by his own ideological worldview—one where the distinction between Turk and Kurd melts away in a common Muslim identity—than by a genuine attempt to resolve the problem. His own personal ambitions to maximize power also played a large role in his approach to the issue. In other words, the Kurdish question follows the rule and is not the exception to Erdoğan's authoritarian drift. This section discusses the details of the Kurdish issue's role in Erdoğan's political plans.

The rise of Islamism and the rise of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey took place simultaneously, from the beginning of the 1990s, and they jointly contributed to undermining the foundations of the old regime. Both the rise of the Islamist Welfare Party and of Kurdish nationalism, represented by the PKK and by various Kurdish political parties that survived only briefly due to being regularly shut down by the regime, were the legacies of the military regime of the 1980s. While the Islamists benefited from the fact that the military junta had crushed the left—leaving the field open for the Islamists—Kurdish radicalization was a direct response

to the severe and systematic repression that the military regime unleashed in the Kurdish regions of the country.

By the 1990s, the notion that the Kurds and the Islamists shared a “common fate” as the oppressed of the republic gained intellectual currency, challenging the regime's Kemalist identity. Abdullah Gül, for example, made this point talking to the American writer Robert D. Kaplan at the end of the 1990s.¹⁶⁸ The Islamists' claim that they had the same kind of grievances as the oppressed Kurdish minority served to accord Islamism a democratic legitimacy that it had not earned, and it also conveniently blurred the cards. In fact, the Islamists had been the main beneficiaries of the policies of a regime that had above all targeted the left and not at all the Islamists, since the founding of the republic. Yet this reality was buried by a liberal-Islamic narrative that kept alive the myth of the supposed Islamic-Kurdish unity in victimization.

Unity there was, but not in the sense of victimization: Kurds and religious conservatism had for decades formed integral parts of the power equation that upheld the Turkish regime. The Kurdish voting bloc—whose vast majority consisted of religious conservatives—had since the introduction of the multiparty system in the 1950s regularly been delivered to the conservative parties that have held the monopoly on government ever since. Indeed, the regime depended on the coalition between the feudal, Kurdish tribal leaders in the east, who delivered the votes of their tribes in return for economic and political favors for themselves, and the business interests in the west, which were the driving force behind the conservative parties. Deferring to religion was, indeed, the ideological glue that ensured the continuous loyalty of the conservative Kurds. Beginning in the 1950s, conservative leaders from Adnan Menderes onward invoked religion to hold “godless” socialism at bay, as did the Turkish-Islamic synthesis following 1980.

In the 1990s, this fundamental power equation began to be undermined: Kurdish radicalization held the potential of denying the Turkish right a substantial part of its voter base. The governing

rightist parties of the 1990s—the Motherland Party and the True Path Party—had alienated the Kurds, especially the latter, which aligned itself firmly to the repressive policies of the General Staff. So when Gül and others evoked a “common destiny” of Kurds and Islamists, they held out the promise of re-establishing the fundamental power equation of the Turkish postwar regime.

Of course, not everyone understood the interests of the regime in this way. One major reason why many in the military distrusted the AKP was the belief that the party was not patriotic enough—that it represented a threat to the nation as it was supposedly bent on selling out national integrity by giving in to Kurdish demands. However, by the time the AKP had been installed in power, a shift in attitudes regarding the Kurdish issue had taken place within parts of the state establishment itself. The AKP’s “Kurdish opening” had a genesis similar to that of the Soviet *“perestroika”* in the 1980s: Just as the ideas about the need of reforming the Soviet system had originally been born and germinated within the Soviet intelligence apparatus before being defined politically, so was Turkey’s Kurdish opening initiated by the MİT, and the “opening” was subsequently operated by MİT.

The “Kurdish opening,” thus, has been co-managed by the AKP and the intelligence organs, which have in turn been increasingly under AKP control. But Erdoğan’s approach to the Kurds has been at once ideological and instrumental. First, he saw the pious majority of Kurds as a natural part of his coalition, and his own Islamic conservative ideology as the umbrella under which the Kurdish problem could be resolved, rendering him considerable prestige. But over time, Erdoğan’s reversals on the Kurdish issue have indicated the extent to which he has proven willing to use the issue instrumentally for his narrow purposes of power.

Thus, Erdoğan’s first opening in 2009 was slammed shut as it turned into a public relations disaster. AKP polling appears to have shown that the party was losing more Turkish nationalists than gaining Kurdish voters. Indeed, Erdoğan had spent considerable energies trying to win Diyarbakır in the 2009 local elections, but the

pro-Kurdish DTP won in a landslide, gaining 60 percent to the AKP’s 31 percent. In the crucial 2011 parliamentary elections, Erdoğan instead played the Turkish nationalist card; for example, in a jab at the MHP, he said he would have hung Öcalan if he had been in power in 1999.¹⁶⁹ Kurdish leaders saw this as simple electioneering and refused to take the bait, hoping that once re-elected, Erdoğan would resume the peace process. This is indeed what happened. The “opening” was at first clandestine: Secret talks were held between representatives from the MİT and PKK in Oslo. The Oslo process was aborted when the contents of the talks were leaked in September 2011, most probably by Gülenists within the security apparatus. The Gülenists were opposed to the “opening,” as they advocated an unreformed form of Turkish nationalism. The Gülenists notably sought to arrest Hakan Fidan and other MİT officials in February 2012, accusing them of treason. However, the “opening” resumed in 2012 when Hakan Fidan, the director of MİT, started to conduct direct talks with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, at his prison island.

Developments in Syria, where a Kurdish autonomous region was declared in Rojava in July 2012, may explain the timing of the start of the talks with Öcalan. The main priority was to bring the insurgency of the PKK to an end, and the talks with Öcalan paid off when the PKK leader declared a cease fire in 2013 and called for an end to the Kurdish fight. But beyond that, the roadmap of the AKP has appeared opaque. What the Kurdish movement wants is fairly clear: self rule in the Kurdish region, education in Kurdish, and the release of Öcalan. The AKP regime has not hinted at any willingness to meet such demands; the assumption behind the Kurdish policies of the AKP speaks not of any radical departure from past practices, but instead of the belief that what needs to be done is merely to re-package the original power equation that glued the Kurds to the system through the invocation of the Sunni Islamic bond.

In March 2013, a message from Öcalan was delivered during the celebration of the Kurdish new year in Diyarbakır, and it clearly

laid out the ideological—and geopolitical—blueprint of the AKP’s “Kurdish opening.” There is every reason to assume that Öcalan’s message had been prepared together with, or even by, MIT director Hakan Fidan and should indeed be seen to reflect the vision of the AKP regime, and not necessarily what Öcalan, a prisoner whose main priority is to secure his release from life imprisonment, thinks. Öcalan’s message articulated an Islamic Turkish-Kurdish synthesis, with a clear emphasis on the historical and religious bond between Turks and Kurds, and evoked the prospect of a Turkish-Kurdish power coalition dominating the Middle East. Öcalan even raised the possibility of enlarging Turkey’s southern borders so as to include the Kurdish parts of Syria and Iraq.

But gradually, it appears the Kurdish movement grew tired of Erdoğan’s refusal to provide any substance whatsoever to the opening. This was all the more glaring given the rapidly unfolding realities in Iraq and Syria. While Erdoğan did build a close partnership with the Barzani government in Iraqi Kurdistan, it was again events in Syria that forced Erdoğan’s hand. Turkey’s support for jihadi forces in their fight against the Syrian Kurds gave the lie to Erdoğan’s claims of a sincere interests in seeking a solution to the Kurdish issue. The Kobani crisis sealed the deal: Erdoğan not only refused to allow aid to beleaguered Syrian Kurds but appeared indifferent to the town’s fate, stating that “if Kobani falls, it falls.”¹⁷⁰ This led to large-scale riots with dozens of dead in Turkey’s southeast. More importantly perhaps, in political terms, it forced the conservative Kurdish tribes to a choice between their Islamic and Kurdish identities. Infuriated by what they perceived as Erdoğan’s support for the Arab jihadis, Kurdish tribes massively deserted the AKP and pledged allegiance to the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP).¹⁷¹

Against this background, the general election of June 2015 represents a historic watershed: For the first time ever, a majority of the Kurdish voters did not rally behind Turkey’s main conservative party. Seven out of 10 Kurdish voters voted for the HDP, with the AKP retaining 3 out of 10 Kurdish voters. The rise of

the HDP shows that Islamic identity no longer suffices to lock in the Kurdish vote.

As the Nawroz message delivered in Öcalan’s name in 2013 indicated, the AKP regime has sought to achieve several things simultaneously—a peaceful end to the PKK insurgency and crushing Kurdish aspirations in Syria—by offering an Islamic-colored ideological and not least geopolitical “package deal.” The former goal called for dialogue with the Kurds inside Turkey, while the latter goal required operations against the Kurds in Syria. As the latter escalated with the siege of Kobani in the fall of 2014, the priorities of the Turkish regime became all too apparent, and with that, the AKP’s hopes of securing the allegiance of the Kurds evaporated. The “New Turkey” that the AKP hoped to build rested on the notion of a “Sunni Nation.” The Kurds, once the Islamic conservative pillar of the Turkish regime since the 1950s, may have dealt it a death blow on June 7, 2015. This, more than anything else, explains Erdoğan’s decision to end the peace process, showing that his main goal was not peace with the Kurds, but using them to build his one-man rule regime.

Conclusions on Authoritarianism

Under Erdoğan’s leadership, Turkey’s political system has undergone considerable change. But this change is not what Turkey’s liberals and Western observers foresaw. Erdoğan and the AKP did manage to break down a sclerotic semi-authoritarian form of government, a “managed democracy” described in Turkey as the “regime of military tutelage.” But what Erdoğan managed to break down was the identity of the informal rulers of this regime, not the structure of the regime itself. In fact, as soon as Erdoğan had evicted the erstwhile rulers, he immediately began promoting a presidential form of government without checks and balances, a system of one-man rule tailored explicitly to his own person. In other words, he aspired to build another form of semi-authoritarian government to replace the regime of military tutelage. So far, Erdoğan has failed to implement this system *de jure*. Yet he has already, for all practical purposes, imposed this system on

Turkey—and in the meantime, kept the skeleton of the “tutelage” system, with himself in the driver’s seat. This is not just conjecture, or even informed analysis: Erdoğan himself has said as much. Speaking in his hometown of Rize on August 14, 2015, he made it clear that:

“There is a president with de facto power in the country, not a symbolic one. The president should conduct his duties for the nation directly, but within his authority. Whether one accepts it or not, Turkey’s administrative system has changed. Now, what should be done is to update this de facto situation in the legal framework of the constitution.”¹⁷²

Thus, gradually, the basic institutions of democracy have increasingly been compromised in favor of an informal power grab by the country’s president. This erosion of the rule of law and civil liberties will not only continue as long as Erdoğan is in office—regardless, as he has made clear, of the actual composition of the representative government—but could continue under future presidents. Perhaps especially if this de facto autocratic presidency is allowed to persist, unchallenged politically or legally, it will establish a precedent for future holders of the office to invoke. Why would they accept constrained authority once the presidency has been unmoored from the constitution? Indeed, the malignant, authoritarian elements that Erdoğan and AKP have introduced into Turkey’s political system may linger well into the future.

As this report went to press, the consequences of Erdoğan’s divisive and polarizing leadership were clearer than ever. A wave of violence has rocked Turkey since the June 7 elections, culminating in a suicide bombing of a peace rally by the HDP and leftist groups in Ankara on October 10, which killed over 100 people. Perhaps surprisingly to Western observers, Kurdish groups and liberal intellectuals blamed Erdoğan’s government for complicity in the bombings. While there is little hard evidence to substantiate such allegations, the Turkish government’s response has been chilling. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu expressed no empathy for the victims—the latter responded by publicly excoriating the HDP, and blamed

the bombing, implausibly, on a joint operation by the PKK and the Islamic State.¹⁷³ Turkish officials have been blamed for providing next to no security for the rally, in spite of admitting to being aware of two dozen prospective suicide bombers being on the loose. The interior minister laughed off the suggestion that he should resign as a result of this security failure, and officials have failed to visit the scene, let alone pay respects to the victims. Quite to the contrary, the police’s immediate response to the twin suicide bombing—just as in the aftermath of a June 2015 suicide bombing in Diyarbakır—was to target the dead and injured with tear gas and water cannons. Whoever carried out the attacks, the government’s behavior suggests it is not on the side of the victims.

Better Late Than Never: The Islamization of Turkey

The authoritarian aspects of the AKP began to become visible relatively early. However, the question of Islamization is more complicated. When the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey’s secular elite warned ominously that this Islamist party would undo the secular Republic, or even turn Turkey into another Iran. For almost a decade, however, nothing of the sort happened, and the secularists were generally disregarded as fanatics, obsessive, and incapable of accepting that the former Islamists had, indeed, changed. The Islamism of the AKP was visible primarily in its foreign policy, with its clear affinities with Islamist regimes and movements across the Middle East. Domestically, the party largely left governing structures intact—unlike Erbakan, Erdoğan and his associates have not so much as uttered a word about Sharia. Of course, the existence of such blunt rhetoric should not be the main measure of a process of Islamization. On a more subtle level, the AKP has presided over a gradual but unmistakable ramping up of efforts to Islamize Turkey’s *society*.

These efforts began early and are visible throughout the AKP’s time in power. But there is a clear dividing line: After 2011, these efforts have gotten bolder and more brazen—be it in the field of legislation, or Erdoğan’s Islamic rhetoric. Prior to 2012, Islamization

was mainly driven by the shifting of the incentive structure in society. Previously, the prospect of a career in business or government made a Western lifestyle appealing. But the process of *kadrolaşma* turned this logic on its head. Beards and headscarves were now subtly, and often less-than-subtly, encouraged. The latter became the most important symbolic issue: Men whose wives did not wear them were rapidly made aware that they were not “on the team,” and many adjusted accordingly.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, an economy was built in which secular business interests were not directly attacked, but certainly fell out of favor; government contracts filled the important function on building up the “pious” bourgeoisie supporting the AKP and Erdoğan.

By 2008, it was possible to discern a subtle but powerful effort toward Islamization, particularly in smaller towns of Anatolia where the state-supported peer pressure made it wise to fast during Ramadan, close shops during Friday prayers, and abstain from alcohol, if it was even available anymore.¹⁷⁵ As time passed, inhibitions on overt Islamic rhetoric and behavior diminished; after 2011, the ramparts appeared to burst. Since that time, there is an overt Islamization of Turkey, which can be viewed in a number of areas. The most important of these is the reform of the education sector, which is now heavily infused with Islamic themes. Alongside this is the rise of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the *Diyanet*, in Turkish politics and society.

A significant factor in the Islamization of Turkey is the interplay between foreign and domestic affairs. Indeed, international relations theories have long argued that foreign policy is, to a considerable degree, an extension of domestic politics. While this is true, it also appears to be the reverse in Turkey. For the longest time, the Erdoğan regime’s foreign policy was the primary exhibit of Turkey’s Islamic orientation, a fact detailed in a December 2013 Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) study. But it is increasingly clear that Turkey’s descent towards a Sunni sectarian foreign policy in 2011-2012 also contributed to speeding up the policies of Islamization at home. Just as the 2011 Arab upheavals accelerated

the return to the AKP’s ideological roots in foreign policy terms, the perception of a major historical event taking shape, which Turkey was destined to lead, also helped crush many of the remaining inhibitions about more overt Islamic policies on the domestic front. This was helped by the greater maneuverability enjoyed by the AKP after the 2010 referendum and 2011 elections, which brought it full control over the state.

This chapter will analyze in greater detail the policies implemented by the AKP in the sectors of education, religious affairs, and business, as these are the most important policies that affect the structure of Turkey’s society and economy in the long term. The chapter will also discuss the interplay of domestic and foreign policy in some detail.

“Raising Pious Generations”: The AKP’s Education Reforms

In February 2012, Erdoğan raised eyebrows when he said his government was aiming at “raising pious generations.” Beginning that month, his government embarked on a wholesale reform designed to Islamize Turkey’s education system.

The timing of Erdoğan’s reforms was not coincidental. They came exactly 15 years after the February 1997 military intervention, which had decreed comprehensive changes to Turkey’s education system. Prior to 1997, compulsory schooling in Turkey was only five years; after primary school, parents were free to enroll their children in traditional secondary schools or vocational schools, including the *imam-hatip* schools that had originally been designed to provide training for imams and preachers in Turkey’s mosques.¹⁷⁶ In addition to the regular curriculum, these schools provide 13 hours per week of Islamic instruction to students. However, from 1973 onward, the schools had grown exponentially after Erbakan’s National Salvation Party used its position in a government coalition to put them on par with secular schools.¹⁷⁷ Not only did they enroll over 1 in every 10 middle and high school students by 1997; close to half of the enrollees were girls, who could neither become *imams* nor *hatips*. Simply put, the *imam-hatip* schools had become

a parallel system of education, which through indoctrination effectively provided the voter base as well as manpower for Turkey's Islamist movement—a deliberate effort to increase the Islamic consciousness of the young generation.¹⁷⁸

One of the military's most important decrees at the National Security Council meeting of February 28, 1997, was to direct the government to increase the length of compulsory schooling to eight years—thus preventing children from being enrolled in religious schools until the age of 14, when they would be less likely to be easily indoctrinated.¹⁷⁹ In parallel, the university entrance examination system was reformed to make it more difficult for *imam-hatip* graduates to gain acceptance to undergraduate degree programs other than theology. Indeed, whereas 75 percent of graduates had entered university, only 25 percent did after the changes.¹⁸⁰ The reforms achieved their objective: *Imam-hatip* enrollment declined dramatically, from 11 percent to 2 percent of relevant-age students. The reform is also credited with improving the general level of education in Turkey, as well as in reducing significantly the number of girls being married at the earliest allowed age of 16.

Thus, the reform achieved the purpose of halting the Islamization of Turkey's youth. But it had the side effect of altering the balance *within* the Islamic movement. Since the Gülen movement's schools were fully secular and had nothing to do with *imam-hatip* schools, they were not affected by the reforms. While the Gülen movement was targeted in other ways in the years following the 1997 military intervention, it was the prime beneficiary of the education reforms. Indeed, for conservative families seeking schools with an Islamic conservative environment, the movement's schools were increasingly the best, and sometimes only, alternative. As a result, their enrollment grew steadily.

February 2012 was also the month when the AKP's conflict with the Gülen movement exploded, after Gülenist prosecutors attempted to arrest the head of the MIT. Thus, while Erdoğan had a long-standing grudge against the secular establishment and an

incentive to reform the education system, the haste with which the reforms were conceived were related to the struggle with the Gülen movement. Up to that point, the AKP had relied heavily on Gülenist cadres to staff critical parts of the bureaucracy. No longer feeling able to trust anyone who attended Gülenist schools, Erdoğan faced the vexing problem that reliable, Islamic manpower was in short supply.

Thus, that month, the AKP launched a package of educational reforms termed “4+4+4,” hastily rammed it through the parliamentary committee on education, and passed it through Parliament. No civil society organizations were consulted and virtually no debate was allowed—leading to fistfights and flying chairs in Parliament as the CHP virulently opposed the legislative amendments. On the surface, the law *extended* compulsory schooling by four years, making school compulsory for a full 12 years. But under the surface, the reforms did exactly the opposite. Now, vocational schools were once again permitted from fifth grade—including, not surprisingly, *imam-hatip* schools. The law also allows parents to homeschool children after fourth grade, which is expected to lead to a reduction of formal schooling, especially for girls in rural areas.

As writer Orhan Kemal Cengiz observed, the reforms turned “religious schools from a selective option to a central institution in the education system.”¹⁸¹ The reforms introduced entrance examinations for all high schools except the *imam-hatip* schools; implying that all students who do not qualify for other schools would have no choice but to enroll in religious schools—what Cengiz termed “an interesting coincidence”. By 2015, reports suggested the number of attendees in *imam-hatip* schools had exploded, to over a million students. And no wonder: In August 2013, over 1,112,000 students took the placement test for high schools with an academic program; there were 363,000 slots available. Those that did not make the cut had to choose between vocational schools, *imam-hatip* schools, and a variety called “multi-program high schools.”¹⁸² But the latter schools are only

available in remote areas and do not even exist anywhere in the province of Istanbul—in practice, forcing parents and students to choose between vocational schools and religious schools.¹⁸³ As a result, 40,000 students were automatically enrolled in *imam-hatip* schools against their will, including many students belonging to the Alevi faith, as well as numerous Christian Armenians.¹⁸⁴

In 2002, when the AKP was elected, a total of 65,000 students studied in *imam-hatip* schools. By 2013, they grew to 658,000 and in 2014, they had reached 932,000.¹⁸⁵ In May 2015, Erdoğan's son Bilal Erdoğan, responsible for the Türev foundation that is in charge of the expansion of the *imam-hatip* schools, announced that students had reached 1 million.¹⁸⁶

While the *imam-hatip* schools are growing rapidly, the reforms also greatly expanded the religious content of academic high schools. And in this regard, Turkey is going directly against a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled in 2007 that Turkey's compulsory classes in religious education, which featured only education in the tenets of Sunni Islam, violated the religious rights of minorities.¹⁸⁷ The government did rename the class to "Religious Culture and Moral Values," to make it appear broader in scope, but in practice nothing changed. For example, students are required to memorize a long list of Quranic verses and prayers, but no texts from any other religion.¹⁸⁸ Incidentally, Christian and Jewish students continue to be exempt from the class, indicating that the government itself views it as an education in Islam.

Far from removing the compulsory classes, the government extended them from one to two hours per week. Not staying at that, it introduced elective courses in "the life of Prophet Muhammad," and "the Quran." That way, students could receive up to six hours of religious education per week. Meanwhile, the number of total hours of school per week was shortened; and thus, several classes were either merged or abolished. For example, the class on "human rights, citizenship, and democracy" is no longer being taught.¹⁸⁹ And while the religious classes are, in theory, elective, in practice they may not be. It is school administrators that decide what

elective classes are to be offered.¹⁹⁰ Changes to the law in 2014 strengthened government control over the appointment of school principals, who have decisive influence on what courses schools offer.¹⁹¹ Since at least 10 students are required to open an elective class, students may be forced to choose among the religious classes even if they do not want to. In a well-publicized case, the daughter of a Protestant pastor in Diyarbakır was exempted from the class on religion and culture but was forced, instead, to choose between elective classes on the Quran or the life of the Prophet.¹⁹²

Turkish students are also very susceptible to what is called *mahalle baskısı*—community pressure—which invariably instills the urge to follow the conservative majority's behavior. A *Newsweek* story on the education reforms reports how a student in a similarly secular area of Istanbul was teased for being an atheist when exempted from a supposedly elective class on the life of the Prophet that she had automatically been assigned to.¹⁹³ It goes without saying that if this happens in secular districts of Istanbul, even the thought of asking for an exemption is unlikely to occur to parents in towns and rural areas across the country. It is not a coincidence that the class on the life of Muhammad was the most popular elective course in the first year it was being offered.

In March 2014, new legislation was adopted that provided the government with a mandate to overhaul the entire structure of the ministry of education, including terminating thousands of high-ranking officials, which could then be replaced by political appointees. Furthermore, reforms in 2010 made it possible to transform regular high schools into *imam-hatip* schools; in 2012, this was made possible for middle schools as well.¹⁹⁴ The government claims that such processes only take place as a result of popular demand, but the record proves otherwise. In fact, government plans to turn secular schools into *imam-hatip* schools have led to street protests in a number of places. The process clearly appears supply-driven rather than demand-driven.

In sum, since 2012, the AKP has dismantled the education reforms of the late 1990s and embarked on a multi-pronged systematic

effort to Islamize Turkey's education system. Unless these reforms are rapidly undone, which is highly unlikely, Turkish society is rapidly being de-secularized. As will be seen below, this process is being assisted by the government institution responsible for religious affairs.

The Diyanet: A Frankenstein in the Making

Whether in Ottoman times or in the Republican era, the Turkish state has made control of religious affairs a priority. In Ottoman times, this function was fulfilled by the Ulema under the leadership of the Sheikh ul-Islam, himself appointed by the Sultan. Following the creation of the Republic, the *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, or Directorate for Religious Affairs, fulfilled this role. Thus, Turkey has never experienced the “separation of church and state” in an Anglo-Saxon sense. Religion has always been under the supervision of the state, which is comparable to the French form of secularism, *laïcité*—the source of the Turkish term *laiklik*, enshrined in the Turkish constitution.

The Diyanet was created in order to maintain state control over the religious sphere of Islam. All imams in every mosque across Turkey were appointed by the Diyanet, which wrote their Friday sermons. This provided an important counter-balance to the lack of hierarchy within Sunni Islam, which often has led to the chaotic proliferation of radical religious groups across the Muslim world. Whereas Muslim youth in Europe are often subject to radicalization in mosques run by radical imams, the role of the Diyanet in Turkey considerably reduced this risk. The Diyanet, therefore, was a key institution of the Republic: It helped legitimize the modernization and Westernization of Turkey from a religious perspective and prevented the mosque from becoming a central focus point for reactionary activity. In this, it largely succeeded; and it is no coincidence that it is considered among the three key institutions of the republican era, together with the Army and the Ministry of Education.

Of course, the setup of the Diyanet had built-in problems. The

most glaring was its absolute indifference to the diversity of Turkish Islam. The republic was a nation-state building project, and thus sought to streamline individuals into a national identity that included, as a cultural marker and increasingly so over time, mainstream Hanafi Sunni Islam.¹⁹⁵ Crucially, the Diyanet's jurisdiction only applies to Islam, as the institution has no responsibility for services to the country's religious minorities, who are defined only as those recognized in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne (i.e., Turkey's Christian and Jewish minorities). But Turkey's nominally Muslim population is highly diverse, despite the common Islamist slogan of a “99 percent Muslim country.” It includes the heterodox Alevis, who today account for approximately 15 million of Turkey's 75 million people; the Jafar'i (Twelver) Shi'a, mainly Azeris in eastern Turkey, making up about 3 million; the Nusayri or Alawis along the border with Syria, another 1 to 2 million; and last but not least, the large majority of Kurds, who are Sunni but follow the Shafi'i rather than the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, accounting for another 12 to 15 million.

In total, 35 to 40 percent of the population is not Hanafi Sunni. Yet the Diyanet has glossed over this diversity, acting as if Turkey has a homogenous Sunni Hanafi identity. In practice, this has meant imposing traditional Hanafi Sunni Islam on the population. For example, the Diyanet has built mosques and sent imams to Alevi and Shafi'i villages, where the imams have no work aside from issuing the call for prayers that no one attends. As Alevi villagers near Çanakkale told a reporter, “no one asked us; we would have preferred a Cemevi,” referring to the Alevi house of worship.¹⁹⁶

A second built-in problem with the Diyanet is that, like many of Turkey's powerful state institutions, it constituted a check on political Islam only as long as the republican establishment controlled the state. As will be seen, however, once the state was under the control of political Islam, these institutions became handy tools for the propagation of this ideology.

The reforms to the Diyanet happened piece by piece from the 1960s onward, as a result of demands from the religious

communities to center-right governments. Under the AKP, however, the Diyanet has undergone a process of rapid change. The most obvious is the exponential growth of the institution. In less than a decade, its budget has quadrupled, amounting to slightly more than \$2 billion, employing over 120,000 people. That makes it one of Turkey's largest state institutions, bigger than the Ministry of Interior.¹⁹⁷ As the Diyanet has grown, its character has also changed. Previously, a solid proportion of its personnel were regular government bureaucrats, not persons with Islamic education. In recent years, however, the makeup of its staff has taken on a more Islamic character.

The use of the Diyanet as a political instrument is fairly recent, dating to 2010-2011. Until late 2010, Diyanet was led by a chairman, Ali Bardakoğlu, appointed by secularist president Ahmet Necdet Sezer. Under Bardakoğlu's tenure, the Diyanet largely stayed out of politics. In 2010, during the course of reforms that ended bans on the Islamic headscarf, Prime Minister Erdoğan suggested that the Diyanet be consulted. Bardakoğlu responded that "consulting the Diyanet on legislation is counter to the principle of secularism".¹⁹⁸ Bardakoğlu also refused to recommend Muslim women to wear the headscarf, emphasizing that it is not a formal requirement of the religion, and called for respect for people's free choice.¹⁹⁹ As a result, Bardakoğlu was fired shortly thereafter and replaced by Mehmet Görmez, who has been considerably more pliant toward the AKP leadership's wishes.

As the size of Diyanet grew, so did its societal role. In 2011, Diyanet began issuing halal certificates for food products; the next year, it opened a television station. Diyanet also produces fatwas, including on demand: a free telephone hotline service that provides Islamic guidance on everyday matters. As one analyst termed it, the hotline "encourages callers to harmonize their daily lives with the principles of Islam."²⁰⁰

The Diyanet made international headlines in 2015 when it determined that, contrary to popular belief, toilet paper is not prohibited by Islam.²⁰¹ The number of fatwas being issued is rising

rapidly. Only in the past year, Diyanet has found that feeding dogs at home, celebrating the Western New Year, lotteries, and tattoos are all prohibited in Islam. Legally speaking, the Diyanet's rulings carry no weight. Following them is entirely voluntary. However, it is unprecedented and incongruent for a state agency in a secular state to provide religious sanction of day-to-day behavior.

Aside from staffing mosques, the main concern of the Diyanet has been with religious education. Aside from *imam-hatip* schools discussed above, the Diyanet offers Quran courses, particularly summer courses for children. With the 2012 education reform, considerable amendments were made to the Quran courses. To begin with, these courses used to be co-managed by the Ministry of Education; now, the Diyanet handles them alone. Previously, students had to be 12 years old to attend; since 2012, there is no longer an age limit. Theoretically, kindergartners could be sent to Quran courses. All regulations on the physical nature of buildings appropriate for such courses were lifted, and requirements for eligible teachers were relaxed. As a result, the possibility has been opened to bring in temporary teachers to meet real or imagined needs; this would make it possible for religious orders to essentially run their own Quran schools with their own teachers. And finally, Quran schools are now permitted to be boarding schools and to have dormitories—a crucial change, because it enables the full immersion of young children in a religious lifestyle.²⁰² As one Turkish commentator concluded, this has led to "the removal, in practice, of one of the most important laws of the revolution, the *Tevhid-i Tedrisat* [unity of education]." In addition, a special project was launched in 2013 for the provision of "Quran courses for preschoolers."²⁰³ Furthermore, the Diyanet now is allowed to operate Quran courses at university dormitories.²⁰⁴

The consequences of these reforms will be visible only in time. But seen against the background of the larger reforms in the education sector, it is clear that they will make the likelihood of radicalization among sections of the population considerably more likely.

These reforms have been paralleled by a much greater visibility

of the Diyanet in the public debate. Symbolically, the difference between the two chairmen is clear. Bardakoğlu did not grow a beard and reportedly rejected demands by Erdoğan that he do so. Görmez, by contrast, began growing one at some time before his appointment. Görmez has also had little compunction about addressing current affairs and has invariably tacked close to the AKP line. Diyanet press releases have supported the introduction of greater Islamic themes in public education, and Görmez found it appropriate to warn the visiting pope of the “rising Islamophobia” in Europe.²⁰⁵ In 2015, he publicly called the pope “immoral” over his stance on the Armenian genocide.²⁰⁶ Görmez also weighed in on the Hagia Sophia mosque, which was turned into a museum in the early years of the republic, stating, “Hagia Sophia is not a church, not a museum, but the sanctuary of Mehmet the Conqueror and all Muslims.”²⁰⁷ He has also called for the “liberation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque” and said that there is “no difference between Israel and ISIS” in terms of the religious doctrines that led to the creation of their respective state entities.²⁰⁸

The Diyanet has also, more carefully, made itself useful in the domestic Turkish political struggles. A March 2014 sermon cabled out to thousands of mosques across Turkey—shortly before the local elections in April—provided implicit support for the Twitter and YouTube bans that the AKP imposed.²⁰⁹ In early 2015, another sermon counseled against sending anti-government tweets.²¹⁰ And on June 6, 2015, the day before the parliamentary election that would see the AKP lose its majority, imams in a number of mosques across Turkey ruffled feathers by urging their community not to vote for “certain parties” but for “Muslims.”²¹¹

Of course, the change in the Diyanet’s profile cannot be blamed on Görmez. As Turkish scholar Iştar Gözaydın stated:

“One should not see it as the Bardakoğlu era or the Görmez era ... the issue is the AKP. For the past two-three years, the AKP has thought it embodies the truth, and has gotten stuck in the notion that the entire society should accept these truths ... this reverberated on Diyanet. Mehmet Görmez is also responsible,

because he did not provide even the minimum resistance to this process. We are living in a period of a shrinking separation between Diyanet and politics.”²¹²

A further matter regarding the Diyanet should be noted: the gradual growth in the influence of nontraditional ideological currents in the form of both the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order and, related to that, Salafi-inspired ideas.

The role of the Naqshbandi order should come as no surprise. Given the paramount role of the Khalidi orders in the Islamist movement, the Diyanet was bound to be a place where Khalidi orders sought to develop their influence. Already in the 1950s and 1960s, the cadres of the *Diyanet* were often insufficient to man all the mosques in the country, not least because there were no imam training schools until 1949. Thus, the Diyanet itself became the subject of infiltration by various religious communities, and the Diyanet to an increasing degree has come to be staffed by graduates of *imam-hatip* schools and the theological faculties. Unsurprisingly, these have come under the influence of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order and its offshoots. Already in the 1950s, the void in trained imams was being filled by the Süleymancı movement, a Khalidi offshoot, which kept Quranic education alive during the “prohibition” period. More recently, in 2010, a Naqshbandi-aligned theologian was appointed deputy chairman of the Diyanet.²¹³ Until his appointment, Hasan Kamil Yılmaz, a professor of theology at Marmara University, was the chairman of the Aziz Mahmut Hüdayi Vakfı, a foundation affiliated with the Erenköy community, an Istanbul-based Khalidi order.²¹⁴

In May 2015, a Naqshbandi sheikh, Ahmet Yasin Bursevi, reinforced the connection. In an answer to a question where he appears to be reading from notes, Bursevi urges all Naqshbandi followers to vote for the AKP. But in an unsolicited addition, he also issues a warning: “there will be attacks on coming days on the Chairman of Diyanet. I want the Ummah of Muhammad to pay close attention to this. If steps are taken to abolish Diyanet, our religion will be lost ... Mehmet Görmez is our army commander.”²¹⁵

In recent years, the Diyanet—and the Naqshbandi order—has also been accused of bowing to the growing influence of Salafi ideology. Whereas traditional Sunni theology recognizes only the Ashari and Maturidi schools of theology, a recent Diyanet equivalent to catechism writes that “in explanation and interpretation ... ahl-i Sunna [Sunni Islam] can be separated into Salafi, Maturidi and Ashari ... the differences between these branches have not led to a breach in the framework that constitutes the basic principles of the ahl-i Sunna.”²¹⁶ As Turkish theologian Hilmi Demir has observed, by recognizing Salafism as a branch of Sunni Islam, and particularly by listing it in first place, the Diyanet’s “classification contradicts traditional as well as Ottoman Ulama classification.”²¹⁷

Thus, in recent years, Turkey has acquired a directorate of religious affairs that comments on political affairs, advises citizens on religiously acceptable conduct, and is embarking on a major effort to spread Quranic education to the earliest ages and to all corners of society. The rhetoric of the Diyanet often paints itself as a bulwark against radicalism, but the Diyanet’s own theology slowly and gradually appears to be infiltrated by Islamist ideology with roots in the Middle East. Given the influence that the Diyanet-controlled mosques have on the conservative masses across Turkey, this development is both among the most consequential and among the most unknown accomplishments of the AKP.

Unequal Footing: Declines in Women’s Rights

Upon his re-election as prime minister in 2011, Erdoğan abolished the Ministry for Women and Family, replacing it with the Ministry for Family and Social Policies. It was an action that seems to have been a grim indicator of the trajectory of women’s rights under the AKP.

Erdoğan and his government have made sweeping moral pronouncements on how women should live their lives. Advocates for women’s rights and critics of the AKP’s social policy most often point to remarks Erdoğan made in 2014, in which he declared that women were not equal to men. “You cannot put women and men on

an equal footing. It is against nature,” Erdoğan said in Istanbul in a speech where he also accused feminists of rejecting motherhood.²¹⁸

Since 2008, Erdoğan has repeatedly called on women in Turkey to have three children to combat Turkey’s shrinking population. In 2013, Erdoğan said, “I am calling on those sisters who are devoted to our cause. Come, please donate to this nation at least three children.”²¹⁹ Likewise, he has railed against abortion, cesarean sections, and birth control, which he publicly declared as treason in December 2014.²²⁰

In advocating for more traditional roles for women, the AKP government has also expressed hostility towards women in the workplace. “Mothers have the career of motherhood, which cannot be possessed by anyone else in the world. Mothers should not put a career other than motherhood at the center of their lives,” said Turkey’s health minister in January 2015 in a speech made to female hospital staff.²²¹ In December, Prime Minister Davutoğlu opining on the high suicide rates in Scandinavian countries, suggesting that “gender equality triggers suicide.”²²²

Critics of the AKP are quick to point out the mixed messages presented by the party. While high-level Turkish politicians are imploring women to seek motherhood as a sole career, their wives and daughters are highly educated women with careers. Davutoğlu’s wife, Sare, is a doctor, while Erdoğan’s daughter, Sumeyye, is in her early 30s, unmarried, and active in politics. Additionally, in the early years of its rule, the AKP fought for acceptance of the headscarf in schools and public spaces, ostensibly to increase the role for pious women in public life—only to later suggest that they marry by 23, have three children, and seek no career outside the home.²²³

In 2014, decreasing rights for women in Turkey pushed it to 125 out of 142 countries on the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index, down five places from the year before, placing it alongside Bahrain, Algeria, and Ethiopia.

The decrease in rights and protections for women in Turkey can be

best seen in the sharp increase in domestic violence and murder of women under the AKP's rule. A government study estimated 40 percent of Turkey's female population was affected by domestic violence in 2015, 10 percent higher than the global average of 30 percent.²²⁴ Furthermore, a Turkish human rights monitor reported that 281 women were murdered in Turkey in 2014, a 31-percent increase from the year before.²²⁵ Figures from the Ministry of Justice show that the murder of women increased a startling 1,400 percent between 2002 and 2009.²²⁶

The plight of women in Turkey received international attention in February 2015, when 20-year-old university student Özgecan Aslan was brutally murdered by a minibus driver, who stabbed her to death after attempting to sexually assault her.²²⁷ Though attracting widespread national attention, human rights monitors also pointed out that Aslan's case was an outlier—the majority of women slain in Turkey (66 percent in 2013 and 56 percent in 2014) were slain by their husbands, ex-husbands, or lovers.²²⁸

In the wake of Aslan's murder, President Erdoğan called violence against women in Turkey a "bleeding wound," yet his government continued its policies that would remove protections on women, making them more vulnerable to abuse.²²⁹ In May 2015, Turkey's Constitutional Court ruled that civil marriage is not a requirement for citizens in religious marriages. The ruling may pave the way for polygamous marriages, increase the number of women in Turkey who are married while underage (a number that is already staggering: a 2011 study showed that almost 40 percent of Turkish women between 15 and 49 were married by the time they turned 18), and leave women and children with no recourse for alimony in the case of divorce.²³⁰

"Capital Is Changing Hands:" The Remaking of Turkey's Economy

The AKP's disempowerment of the military is not the only big change that has taken place during more than a decade of its being in power. As has been already noted, the military has

returned, albeit not to its former position, but to being recognized as a major stakeholder in the affairs of the state. What has been given much less attention is the other big change that has taken place during the AKP's tenure and which may ultimately prove to be much more consequential for Turkey's future course than the (now partly reversed) disempowerment of the military. This concerns the relative decline of the power of the traditional big business interests, and in hindsight, this change may come to be recognized as the truly radical change, the one that sets the AKP era fundamentally apart in Turkish republican history. The AKP government is the first one to have taken an unfriendly stance toward traditional big business, that is, toward the secular fraction of the business elite. This is the first time that these interests, represented by TÜSİAD, the Association of Turkey's Industrialists and Businessmen, are excluded from the power equation and the first time that they are no longer taken into account politically by the government. In fact, TÜSİAD has been an open target of Erdoğan's regime since 2010.

TÜSİAD largely groups the companies that represent "old" capital in Turkey, which have the most developed relations with European and American business and with international capital. Not every member fits the description "secular," and there are dissensions within TÜSİAD regarding the stance that should be taken in relation to the policies of the AKP. Many of its members have been known to favor keeping a low profile and getting along with the regime, lest their business interests be harmed. Nonetheless, on several occasions since 2010, leading representatives of TÜSİAD as well as the association itself have taken stances—or refused to take stances—that have made it clear that TÜSİAD and the AKP stand for different political visions.

In 2010, TÜSİAD's then-President Ümit Boyner was the first to draw Erdoğan's ire after the association had refused to endorse the government line in the 2010 referendum on constitutional amendments, which gave the Gülenists—then the AKP's allies—full control over the judiciary. Erdoğan threatened Boyner, stating,

“Those who don’t take sides will be purged.” It became clear, then if not before, that Erdoğan and AKP saw TÜSİAD as an enemy. Additional disagreements were voiced over the repressive policies of the AKP following the Gezi protests. More recently, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu refused to meet with representatives of TÜSİAD following his appointment: “I did not give them any appointment because they are trying to drive a wedge between myself and our president,” Davutoğlu explained.²³¹ When a meeting did finally take place following the June 7, 2015, general election, TÜSİAD President Canan Başaran Symes stated, “The ices have now melted.”²³² That appeared to be wishful thinking.

Historically, the Turkish state has nurtured the growth of a business class, and the biggest companies of Turkey, such as the Koç and Sabancı groups, have their roots in the early republican decades. This business class has also been explicitly secular and culturally and economically Western-oriented. It has been a powerful agent of Turkey’s Westernization, in some ways much more so than the military, whose role in this regard has been vastly exaggerated. While the military, at least during the Cold War, functioned as Turkey’s link to the Western security system, the relation that the secular bourgeoisie maintained with the West—with its extensive economic and social relations—has been far more consequential in a cultural sense. If anything has made Turkey “Western,” it is business relations, which among other things, have resulted in over half of Turkey’s trade being linked to Europe. Yet in the Western discourse on Turkey, little attention has been paid to the critical importance of the secular bourgeoisie, and even less so to the implications of its relative decline during the AKP era. The decline of the power of the secular, Western-oriented business class is bound to have an adverse impact in a cultural and ideological sense.

This decline has so far escaped attention in part because so much interest has been focused on what many considered the hopeful rise of another fraction of Turkey’s bourgeoisie, the so-called “Anatolian Calvinists,” the Islamic business class. As has

been described above, the standard liberal and leftist narrative viewed Islamists as a genuine societal challenge to a dominant authoritarian class. Thus, the dominant narrative (internationally and among Turkey’s “organic intellectuals”) went something like this: New, Muslim, Anatolian capitalists had prospered thanks to globalization, not because the authoritarian Turkish state had helped them, and that allegedly made them into agents of political freedom. That set them apart from the old, secular bourgeoisie that had prospered under the protection of the state. The proof of the beneficial ideological impact of their material interests was that they had brought a moderate, “Muslim democrat” party friendly to the West into being: the AKP. Turkish liberals thus announced the arrival of freedom, upheld by “Anatolian Calvinist” capitalism, and rejoiced that the old bourgeoisie was going to be pushed aside.

The latter part has indeed happened. But aside from that, the story of Turkish capitalism during the AKP’s tenure has not followed the script of the liberal narrative because the fundamental assumptions of this narrative were erroneous. As one Turkish scholar puts it:

“Contrary to received wisdom, the ‘Turkish model’ was not based on the entrepreneurial potential of emerging conservative businessmen of Anatolia unleashed by a market friendly and moderately Islamic government, but on a regulatory framework which has been continuously modified to open more space for arbitrary government intervention in support of politically privileged entrepreneurs.”²³³

Furthermore, the notion that it was the old, secular business class that upheld state authoritarianism has been proven wrong. Instead, the interplay of the AKP’s power and the interests of the new, Islamic business class have *reversed* a process of liberalization that had seemed to be underway a decade ago, when the retraction of state power and the advent of a genuinely free market economy were slowly happening. Inevitably, the decline of the power of the secular, Western-oriented business interests has had an adverse impact in a cultural and ideological sense as well.

Erdoğan has claimed that “capital is changing hands.” Even though that remains a work in progress, it is nonetheless obvious that the AKP harbors the ambition to shift the weight within the business elite from its dominant, secular fraction, to the Islamic fraction. With this in mind, the party has created its own class of capitalists. Turkish economist Şevket Pamuk has observed, “capital has not changed hands, but the wealth of those who are close to power has grown faster.”²³⁴ Elsewhere, he has noted, “after 2007, [the] AK Party decided to control the economy instead of opening it up. It is as if it set the creation of rich people close to the party as the main economic target.”²³⁵ Similarly, Bosphorus University economist Çağlar Keyder remarked that in this state-controlled economy, “TÜSİAD companies are totally kept out; they don’t get any of the tenders.”²³⁶ Economist and commentator Ergin Yıldızoğlu concludes, “today, one cannot speak of any free market economy in Turkey.”²³⁷

Of course, the state has always played a decisive role in the economy in Turkey by supporting business interests. In that sense, the AKP’s crony capitalism does not represent a novelty; rather, it represents a throwback to an earlier era of primitive capital accumulation. Thus, a legitimate question is to what extent this reality is a function of the AKP’s ideology, or related more directly to the crony capitalism that Erdoğan has set up to secure his own personal power base.

Keyder insists that the Erdoğan factor has been singularly decisive for this process: “Erdoğan is an altogether different matter.” Keyder argues that it is not entirely correct to read the talk about capital changing hands as the sign of a “bourgeois civil war.”²³⁸ Rather than mirroring a class dynamic, he suggests, it is indicative of Erdoğan’s ideological goals and speaks of his ambition to create a capitalist class that is beholden to him personally. To conclude that the two parts of the bourgeoisie—the secular and the Islamic—are engaged in intra-class warfare is thus misleading: for political purposes, the state is privileging one fraction at the expense of the other. The state—personified by Erdoğan—is seen as commanding a fraction of the dominant class, using it as a tool for

its own, ideological purposes: “just as we were on our way toward a situation in which the business sector is independent of the state and when the political economy thus determines the politics, we are now back again to the ‘Turkish model,’ to a situation where the rule of politics over the political economy has been reinstated.”²³⁹

Many Turkish analysts agree with Keyder that the Erdoğan factor is paramount in explaining the evolution of Turkey’s economy. In this perspective, the emergence of crony capitalism under AKP was far from inevitable: “It is the same system as in Central Asia, one-man rule, with a group of business cronies beholden to the supreme leader ... We would not have had crony capitalism without Erdoğan—for instance Gül would not have run the economy like this.”²⁴⁰

But this perspective ignores a distinctive feature of Turkey’s new capitalism, which is the existence of two different models of capital accumulation, both with political implications regarding the role of the state, the rule of law and Turkey’s foreign relations. As Ayşe Buğra observes, “the changes in the business environment continued with escalating political polarization which was reflected in the different trajectories of business associations.” TÜSİAD opted for a model “that incorporates a regulatory framework where the scope of political discretion would be minimized,” something that followed the original intentions of the reforms introduced by the 2001 caretaker government following the economic crisis.²⁴¹ TÜSİAD’s strategy “favored close relations with developed Western countries in general, and the European Union in particular, requiring the establishment of—and respect for—a legal framework where the exercise of discretionary power by the government would be limited,” and accepted the role of organized labor. However:

“Another model of capitalist development took shape as the business actors close to the government opted for an economic strategy that allowed broader scope for discretionary political intervention in the economy. While during the early phases of the AKP government they did not explicitly oppose Turkey’s candidacy to the EU, these associations took an active

part in a foreign policy orientation diverging from the country's traditional Western-looking one. Their approach to industrial relations, as well as to questions of inequality and poverty, was significantly shaped by Islamic norms of moral conduct and social equity."²⁴²

This way of looking at the evolution of Turkish capitalism under the AKP differs from Keyder's argument, which minimizes the differences between the business interests that are represented by TÜSIAD and MÜSIAD. However, the choices regarding the institutional framework of the economy and the strategic orientation of foreign economic relations do indeed appear to be closely related to the economic interests of the actors involved:

"Rule of law and bureaucratic autonomy are not particularly attractive to business associations that can better pursue their members' interests in a setting where discretionary political intervention supports some business actors and marginalizes others."²⁴³

Buğra concludes, "it is this alignment of economic interest and political outlook which explains the formation of the constituency of the AKP and the direction Turkish domestic and foreign policy strategy has taken during the last decade."²⁴⁴

There is certainly a case to be made that it matters, culturally and ideologically, in which hands capital belongs. Mustafa Koç, the chairman of the Koç Group, is a case in point: In June 2015, Koç announced that the companies of the group are going to commit to working for gender equality in society. Koç has also joined the U.N. campaign for equal rights and has enjoined everyone in Turkey—where violence against women has been on the rise during the last decade—to defend women's rights and societal equality, a positioning of unequivocal political significance. Turkey's Islamic business magnates are yet to distinguish themselves by making a similar commitment.

The Foreign and the Domestic: Arab Upheavals

"Starting from 2012, I was no longer able to control them." These are the words of former President Abdullah Gül, according to a Turkish journalist who enjoys a close relation with him.²⁴⁵ According to his confidant, Gül was referring to Erdoğan and the rest of the AKP government, and his loss of ability to exert control over them was an effect of the "Arab Spring." Allegedly, as Gül sees it, it was the dreams of Sunni grandeur that led the regime astray.

This is perhaps an exaggeration; domestic developments in 2010-2011 also were prerequisites for the increasingly brazen authoritarian and Islamizing policies described in this report. As has already been discussed, following the 2010 referendum and 2011 elections, there were no longer any checks on Islamic conservatism, and the only check on Erdoğan was the Gülen movement. Assuming that the AKP continued to harbor an Islamist agenda, it was only natural that this agenda would emerge once the republican establishment had been thoroughly vanquished, which happened in 2011. Yet there is considerable reason to conclude that the developments surrounding Turkey had a profound effect on the worldview of the Turkish leadership, in a way that also affected domestic politics. Prior to the Arab upheavals, an eastward drift in Turkey's foreign policy was already visible, but it was pan-Islamic rather than sectarian, and it was incremental rather than radical.

As detailed in BPC's 2013 study *The Roots of Turkish Conduct*, the AKP's foreign policy in the 2007-2011 period was rooted in the concept of "zero problems with neighbors," coined by Ahmet Davutoğlu. This doctrine was poorly understood in the West, where it was accepted at face value as a welcome contrast to the "aggressive nationalist Turkey of the 1990s."²⁴⁶ But Davutoğlu's doctrine was based on a belief that the West and the Muslim world were fundamentally different,²⁴⁷ and that the attempt to Westernize Muslim societies, including Turkey, was both impossible and undesirable.

In summary, the worldview that formed the basis for Turkish foreign

policy held that the West, having abandoned religion, was on a path of decay and “moral corruption.” The collapse of communism was a precursor to the coming collapse of the Western domination of the world. Against this background, Turkey’s Islamic and Ottoman past provides it with “Strategic Depth.” Its imperial legacy and the common unifying factor of Islam would make it possible for Turkey to exert leadership in the Middle East, Eurasia, and the Balkans. In order to build Turkey’s new role of regional leadership, it must build alternative alliances supplanting its Western relations—primarily with Muslim countries, but also with non-Western powers resisting Western hegemony, such as Russia and China. In this way, Turkey would “become a trans-regional power that helps to once again unify and lead the Muslim world.”²⁴⁸

This doctrine rested on the assumption that the nation-state system imposed on the Middle East was unnatural and corrupt; but until 2011, the Turkish leaders did not view its collapse as imminent. Thus, for the time being and in order to pragmatically advance Turkey’s regional role, Ankara cultivated ties with regimes across the region, irrespective of their sectarian identity. The pan-Islamic character of this worldview motivated the embrace of Tehran, and the pragmatic effort to coax Syria into a role as a Turkish client led to the embrace of the Assad regime. Of course, the ideological nature of the foreign policy was increasingly visible. The embrace of Hamas was one of the earliest indications, beginning already in the AKP’s first term. The growing hostility to Israel was another tell-tale sign. Likewise, the decision to make the Bashir regime in Sudan Turkey’s “window to Africa” made little sense unless understood from an ideological perspective. With that said, Turkey at this point did not pursue regime change and did not display any interest in radical Islamist movements aside from Hamas, which stood out by being both in control over Gaza as well as the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, in turn an ideological inspiration to the AKP.

To sum up, the AKP foreign policy rested on a belief that the West was in decline; harbored an inclination to build relationships with

non-Western powers to balance Turkey’s Western alliance; sought to make Turkey a regional leader in the Middle East explicitly on the basis of its Islamic identity and Ottoman past; and believed the nation-state system in the region to be an artificial, Western transplant.

The Arab upheavals acted as a catalyst that transformed Turkey into an assertive, if not aggressive, anti-status quo power in the Middle East. Turkish Islamists had long hoped for the demise of the secular authoritarian regimes across the region; now, this was actually happening. And where Western leaders saw the opportunity to introduce democratic governance in the existing nation-states of the region, the Turkish leadership saw a chance to help secure the victory of transnational Islamism, personified by the Muslim brotherhood. Thus, Turkey took the lead in calling for the ouster of Egypt’s Mubarak and subsequently became the main backer of the Brotherhood regime of Muhammed Morsi. Following the ouster of Morsi, Turkey became the sworn enemy of the al-Sisi regime, and to this day, refuses to have any relationship with it.

Similarly, in Syria, Erdoğan transitioned from the role of a patron of the Assad regime to its most vocal enemy. As is by now well established, Turkey has formed a key conduit for the movement of jihadi forces of all stripes into Syria. Turkey’s direct support for the Al-Nusra front has been well documented, while the available evidence suggests Turkey may not have directly support ISIS, but certainly looked the other way as ISIS recruited fighters in Turkey and used the country as a staging ground as well as a place to treat its wounded.²⁴⁹

As Soner Çağaptay observed at the time, the intervention in the Syrian civil war was “Turkey’s most brazen foreign policy gambit ever.”²⁵⁰ For the first time ever, Ankara has openly pursued a policy of regime change in a neighboring country. The fact that the endeavor is fraught with grave dangers has become evident with the passing of time, and it has also strained U.S.-Turkish relations.²⁵¹ Turkey’s Syrian involvement was not driven by any anti-Shiite, Sunni resentment in the wake of the “loss” of Iraq,

or more broadly to settle accounts with Tehran, as was the case for Saudi Arabia.

But neither was the Turkish alignment with Sunni conservatism a pure geopolitical—or for that matter, ideological—coincidence. Turkey's Middle Eastern policies were determined by power ambitions; in the words of Davutoğlu, “we will continue to be the master, the leader, and the servant of this new Middle East.”²⁵² Turkey's ambitions rested upon its Sunni identity, and its intervention on behalf of Sunni allies and clients put the country in direct confrontation with Iran. This was the case in Syria, which before the rise of ISIS developed into a proxy war between Ankara and Tehran. It was the case also in Iraq, where Turkey backed the Sunni Arabs and Kurds against the Shi'ite dominated regime of Nuri al-Maliki, which had essentially become an Iranian client regime.

It is telling how Turkey's regional behavior differed from the major Sunni powers, such as Saudi Arabia. Ankara and Riyadh were aligned against Bashar al-Assad, but Egypt was another story. Ankara did everything to boost the Muslim Brotherhood, seeking to build a pro-Turkish Sunni crescent from Egypt to northern Iraq across Gaza and Syria, but the Gulf monarchies (with the notable exception of Qatar) saw the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as a dangerous threat to the status quo, and to their own regimes. When the Brotherhood was overthrown by al-Sisi in 2013, this led to an intra-Sunni confrontation that seriously damaged Turkish-Saudi relations. A similar situation developed also in Libya. While the internationally recognized government led by Abdullah al-Thinni is supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Qatar have lent support and arms (through Sudan) to the Islamist rebels fighting this government, including the Al Qaeda-affiliated Ansar al-Sharia.²⁵³

Thus, the Arab Upheavals triggered a turn to radicalism and anti-Western revisionism in Turkey's foreign policy. This also became clear in Erdoğan's rhetoric. In October 2014, at the time of the controversy over Kobani, Erdoğan in a televised speech railed against the West and likened alleged foreign interference in the

Middle East to Lawrence of Arabia. He implored the Shi'a, Sunni, and PKK fighters wreaking havoc in the region to ask themselves “whom you are gladdening,” and attacking the Sykes-Picot agreement that drew the boundaries of the post-Ottoman Middle East.²⁵⁴ As one analyst put it, Erdoğan's “tirade bears a rather striking resemblance to some of the propaganda that has come out of the so-called Islamic State.”²⁵⁵ In June 2015, Erdoğan returned to the topic, asserting that “the Sykes-Picot agreement has determined our region for the past century ... it is the main reason for so much pain, violence, wars and wasted brotherly blood.”²⁵⁶ In Erdoğan's speeches, it became customary to assign blame to “foreign plots” often described as “alien to this geography,” with designs on Turkey, aiming to prevent the country from realizing its destiny as a regional leader.

In retrospect, Turkey's reactions to the events of 2011-2015 must be seen against the background of its leadership's ideological roots—a conspiratorial worldview where the West, in cooperation with or controlled by world Jewry, is constantly working to keep the Muslims down and Turkey weak. From this perspective, once the Arab upheavals happened, the United States demanded regime change in Syria, but failed to follow up. Meanwhile, the Kurds of Syria build a *de facto* state on Turkey's borders. The Fethullah Gülen movement, headquartered in the United States, breaks with Erdoğan and tries to arrest his intelligence chief, leading Erdoğan to think he was the target. Then the Gezi Park protests all of a sudden happen, promoted through Western social media. And just as the Muslim Brotherhood was taking over Egypt, al-Sisi was allowed, or instructed, to stage his coup. Then, Gülenist prosecutors try to bring down Erdoğan's government by accusing four ministers of corruption and only narrowly failed to detain members of his own family. To the conspiratorial mindset dominating the Islamist movement, it is unthinkable that these incidents could *not be* related. Quite to the contrary, they must be part and parcel of a grand scheme to roll back the threat posed by the Arab upheavals to the Sykes-Picot order, and for this to happen, Turkey must be brought into line.

In other words, the developments following the Arab upheavals were bound to have a powerful impact on Turkish leaders. Foreign events and domestic developments were all seen in the same light, as part of the same plan—because Turkey is the region’s natural leader, foreign efforts to thwart Turkey’s rise also included all forms of subversion at home. This had the effect of reinforcing the identity politics, the sectarian roots, and the sense of a historical mission of the Islamist movement. It also once again raised the stakes: Erdoğan has repeatedly let it be known that he believes that what was done to Morsi was going to be done to him. The editor of the AKP mouthpiece *Yeni Şafak* (owned by the Albayrak family, which is related to Erdoğan by marriage) put it succinctly: “The forces that commissioned Sisi’s coup are the same ones that commissioned the 17 December coup ... the coup scenario handed to Sisi in Egypt was given to the Fethullah Gülen group in Turkey.”²⁵⁷ The newspaper’s Ankara bureau chief, Abdülkadir Selvi, similarly argued that “the international system chose two targets. Morsi in Egypt, Erdoğan in Turkey. They succeeded in Egypt ... they failed in Turkey.”²⁵⁸

In sum, it is clear that the Arab upheavals constitute a case where foreign policy had a direct impact on domestic politics. The regional environment surrounding Turkey combined with the ideologically rooted worldview of the Turkish leadership to reinforce and exacerbate the AKP government’s Islamist turn. Given their growing control over the state, Erdoğan and the AKP were likely to softly ramp up their efforts to Islamize the country. However, this would almost certainly have been done in a more gradual and slower manner had it not been for the regional environment following the Arab upheavals.

Unfortunately, the United States unwittingly played the role of an accomplice in this project. The Obama administration’s half-hearted policies in the region contributed to reinforcing the Turkish leadership’s ambitions, while simultaneously entrenching their conspiratorial perceptions. Initially, the administration’s seeming intention to subcontract much of Middle Eastern policy to Turkey

swelled ambitions in Ankara. Later, the United States equivocated on Syrian and Egyptian issues to an extent that allowed wild conspiracy theories to dominate the thinking in Turkey on U.S. intentions.

In this sense, Turkey’s ideological drift took place within the broader context of U.S. encouragement of Turkish designs. Just as international capital flows have been the life-line of the AKP regime, so have American geopolitical strategies bolstered its ideologically determined foreign policy objectives in the Middle East. From the summer of 2012, the United States and Turkey started to closely coordinate their efforts to bring about regime change in Damascus. American and Turkish officials held regular operational planning meetings, aimed at hastening the downfall of Assad. Indeed, as Çağaptay asserted, the Syrian War ushered in “springtime for U.S.-Turkish ties.”²⁵⁹ Yet only two years earlier, Turkey had voted against new sanctions against Iran in the U.N. Security Council (in 2010, when it held a temporary seat) and led a joint effort with Brazil to broker a deal with Iran, infuriating the Obama administration. This led to one of the few direct rebukes of Erdoğan by President Obama, delivered at a G-20 summit in Toronto.

At that time, Turkey’s “zero problems” policy included a strong embrace of Tehran, and Ankara looked the other way when the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij militia crushed the “Green Revolution.” But this policy led Turkey to a dead end. Even before the Arab upheavals would pit Ankara against Tehran in Syria, the Turkish leadership concluded that the Obama administration was determined to pressure Iran over its nuclear program. This left Turkey with few options but to line up alongside its Western allies when the decision was taken at the November 2010 NATO Summit in Lisbon to develop a ballistic missile defense capability, in large part to deter a perceived threat from Iran. Turkey agreed to host an early warning radar station, and the installation in Kürecik, Malatya, went operational in January 2012. Turkey’s shift from trying to be a mediator to joining the American-led effort to contain,

and ultimately roll back, Iranian power ambitions was foregone once Washington had demonstrated its determination to increase the pressure on Tehran. Ankara's shift also flowed from the belief that it would gain power and stature and reap the benefits if the U.S. succeeded in restraining Iran's nuclear ambitions. Moreover, it provided an important lesson to Ankara's power-brokers: Even intense American criticism could be easily deflected with a military concession that reassured the United States Government that Turkey remained a solid member of NATO. Unsurprisingly, Erdoğan would embark on a similar gambit in 2015, ostensibly joining the coalition against ISIS while seeking American support for his new military offensive against the Kurds.

When the Syrian uprising gained ground, the perception that Turkey enjoyed American "cover" for a foreign policy that did not refrain from confronting Iranian interests emboldened the Turkish government to throw its weight behind the armed Sunni rebellion against Assad, Iran's main regional ally. But in the past year, Washington's shift has complicated the calculation. The Obama administration's pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran and shift toward a focus on defeating ISIS rather than overthrowing Assad has led to a profound sense of betrayal in Ankara, exacerbated by differences over Egypt, where America's equivocation was read as endorsement of al-Sisi. This combined with the domestic struggles between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement to spurn conspiracy theories of American efforts to undermine and even overthrow Erdoğan.

By contrast to Syria, the Turkish pursuit of a Sunni agenda in Iraq did put it at odds with the American interest in maintaining the integrity of the Iraqi state. Turkey has not displayed any inclination to accommodate American interests in Iraq. Ankara has remained determined to pursue the development of an independent oil relation with the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq to which Baghdad—and Washington—objects. But Turkey has been acting from a position of strength in Iraq, as it is well entrenched both economically and politically in Iraqi Kurdistan and can afford

to ignore American pleas.

In Syria on the other hand, where it faces its most existential threat to date, Turkey is not in a position to challenge American decisions. Erdoğan has been disappointed with President Obama's unwillingness to apply military force to oust Assad, but one may speculate what the effects on Turkey's involvement in Syria would have been if Washington had made clear that the military option had been taken off the table. Instead, in July 2015, Erdoğan opportunistically sought to placate Washington when he symbolically joined the coalition against ISIS, when the real aim, transparently, was to embark on a struggle against the Kurds in order to achieve an improved electoral tally in early elections to be held in November 2015.

The aloofness of American policy had the unintended side effect of *simultaneously* leading Turkey to think it could achieve its objectives of regional leadership under American cover; that it could get away with liaisons with jihadi groups across the region in achieving those objectives; but also that America was conspiring with the regime's enemies to undermine the rise of a powerful Turkey ruled by Islamic conservatives.

Conclusions on Islamization

The Islamization of Turkish society under AKP rule followed a similar trajectory to the growing authoritarianism of the Turkish state: a linear progression that was proportional to the AKP's domination of politics and political institutions. The only major difference is that the overt policies of Islamization began later and were initially more gradual. Indeed, during its first two terms in power, the AKP government stayed clear of outright Islamic rhetoric, let alone direct efforts to Islamize the state or society. But following the 2011 election, Erdoğan and his entourage felt comfortable enough to put Islamization efforts into overdrive. This happened first in the realm of foreign policy, over which the government had full control, and subsequently continued in key areas of domestic affairs.

In a very short period of time, major reforms have been undertaken to Islamize every sector of Turkey's education system, with far-reaching implications for the identity of the young generation that is being shaped today. Similarly, the rapid growth in influence of a state directorate of religious affairs, which is really a state directorate of Sunni Islam, lends an official stamp to the growing admonition to live according to Sunni Islamic teachings. Alongside these major reforms, a key element is what amounts to the de-secularization of Turkey's top state institutions. In the 2015 election campaign, Erdoğan on several occasions brandished Qurans on a campaign trail, and Islamic themes and practices have gained acceptance at official events. The celebration of Victory Day on August 30 is one of the key yearly official events of the republic, commemorating the victory in the war of independence in 1922. In 2015, Erdoğan for the first time held the official Victory Day reception in his massive presidential palace. The event was novel in two ways: It began with the recitation of the Quran, and the President and his wife broke with protocol by not shaking hands with visitors.²⁶⁰

At this point, the question is how far Erdoğan is willing, or able, to go in his efforts to Islamize Turkey. The policies implemented so far have mainly been of a symbolic nature, or designed to affect society's identity in the long-term. These steps are important; but aside from the changes to the educational curriculum, they have not yet translated into substantial coercive measures to ensure the population abides by Islamic principles. But these types of reforms have a logic of their own, and there is a tendency for more to beget more. If Erdoğan and the AKP remain in power, it is likely only a question of time before coercive elements become apparent.

The problem with these policies is threefold. First, it keeps the negative aspects of Turkey's official secularism, while dispensing with the positive ones. In other words, it erodes what remained of the republic's firewall preventing the influence of religion on politics, while maintaining the domination of the state over the religion of the majority. Second, it is already proving to be highly

divisive in a country where over a third of the population is not Hanafi Sunni Islam. And finally, the introduction of Islamic values is not dissociated from politics or from ideology. Indeed, the interpretation of religion that is being transmitted through official channels is, increasingly, that of a particular religious order: the understanding of Sunni Islam embraced by the Khalidi Naqshbandi order, from which not only the AKP but almost all of Turkey's Islamic communities and social movements hail. That, in turn, is a highly ideological and anti-Western interpretation of Islam, which is bound to make Turkey's state and society increasingly distant from its Western partners in the years to come.

Conclusion



Turkey and the AKP appear to enjoy a certain uniformity of opinion among Washington observers. Perhaps as a result of the significance of the U.S.-Turkish relationship, perhaps due to politics supposedly stopping at the water's edge, a consensus view of Turkey dominates among policymakers and analysts of all political persuasions. In 2003, upon the AKP's ascension, the hope for a new, more democratic chapter in Turkish politics was shared widely, and not just in Washington. By early 2014, after it became clear that the brutality exhibited at the Gezi Park protests was not an aberration, opinion began to shift. By the time of the June 2015 parliamentary election, a new consensus had recognized the increasingly authoritarian direction the country had taken.

But such unanimity hides a certain analytical superficiality. Turkey's worrisome direction has been plainly observable since

at least 2010. The change that has occurred in how the AKP is viewed has been the result of inescapable empirical evidence. But, despite the imperative to adapt to the changing reality in Turkey, U.S. observers have rarely engaged in a deeper reflection of what the failure of the AKP to live up to the potential originally ascribed to it means for our understanding of Turkey and the AKP itself.

As a result, it is still common for analysts to assert that the AKP was fulfilling its democratizing mission until it arrived at some inflection point, whether it was the 2011 elections or the 2013 Gezi protests. And, to the extent that this inflection point is examined, most identify it as originating in a single individual: Erdoğan. Whether as the result of a primal ambition finally unchained or some manner of psychological transformation, the sidelining of moderates within the AKP, the turn against former allies, the expansion of government

powers, and the erosion of civil liberties are all commonly attributed to Erdoğan's pursuit of unchecked power.

This study is an attempt to understand not just what went wrong in Turkey under the AKP—the course of events that has led it down an authoritarian path—but also why and how it found itself on this path. This excavation of the ideological and political origins of the AKP sheds light both on Turkey's current situation and its future trajectory. In the process, however, it also yields insights about some of the myopic or unwarranted assumptions underlying policy thinking about Turkey that have implications for policymakers going forward.

Conclusions

Continuity, Not Change

As documented above, the Milli Görüş tradition was fundamentally authoritarian and anti-democratic; it espoused economic thinking that was becoming outdated; it was anti-European and anti-Western; and it was anti-Semitic, basing its worldview to a considerable extent on belief in a Jewish world conspiracy. The AKP presented itself in 2002 as a new “post-Islamist” party that had broken with this current of Turkish political Islamism.

The positions adopted by the AKP—support for EU accession, embrace of capitalism, and use of democratic rhetoric—certainly suggested a sharp pivot away from the policies pursued under Erbakan's leadership. The transformation of the movement was, however, at the very least incomplete: it visibly debated and changed its views on what it had previously identified as the symptoms of the problems — the EU or capitalism. Yet it only toned down its denunciation of the core of the problem — the alleged Jewish domination of the world. Nowhere in the debates surrounding the creation of either the FP, or subsequently the AKP, was there a denunciation of the coherent, deeply anti-Semitic and conspiracy based belief system that formed the core of the Milli Görüş worldview. If anything, while this component was central to the movement's ideology, it was not subjected to any serious

reckoning. In this sense, a political transformation that appears deep and comprehensive, in fact, turns out to be comparatively shallow.

There can be little doubt today that a considerable portion of the rationale for the Islamist movement's transformation was tactical. Leading figures even admitted as much — noting that their ideals had been defeated and it was time to move on, barring which they would never be able to reach power. Moreover, not only was the AKP a continuation of the Milli Görüş ideological tradition, despite its claims to the contrary, but the very act of tactical political evolution was part of that inheritance, a trick that Erbakan had used several times before in his own quest for political power.

Transformation Already Underway

“Today is the day that Turkey rises from its ashes,” Erdoğan said upon ascending the presidency in August 2014. “It's the day the process to build the new Turkey gains strength.”²⁶¹ By then, most observers understood that this “new Turkey” would not be the one originally promised by the AKP in 2002, but an authoritarian state with power centralized in Erdoğan's hands. Fear of such a transformation is what made the June 2015 parliamentary election so critical. An AKP victory, many warned, would open the door to a deleterious alteration of Turkey's political system and institutions.

But that transformation has already been underway for some time. An analysis of the AKP's record of governance shows a concerted and sustained attempt to construct a Turkey that differs considerably from that which has existed for the last nine decades. While Erdoğan and the AKP did manage to break down a semi-authoritarian form of government, as soon as they had evicted the erstwhile rulers, they immediately began promoting a presidential form of government without checks and balances, a system of one-man rule tailored to Erdoğan's person. In other words, the AKP has aspired to build another form of semi-authoritarian government to replace the regime of military tutelage.

In addition to creeping authoritarianism, Erdoğan and the AKP

have also embarked on a gradual Islamization of Turkish society. Prior to 2012, Islamization was mainly driven by the shifting of the incentive structure in society: beards and headscarves were subtly, and often less than subtly, encouraged or required for public sector jobs or to land government contracts. Since 2011, the Islamization of Turkey has become more overt. The AKP, whose leader has spoken of his intent to raise “pious generations,” has undertaken major reforms to Islamize every sector of Turkey’s education system, has worked actively to reduce Turkish women’s participation in public life, and has built an economic system based on crony capitalism, uprooting entrenched and mostly secular and Western-oriented big business to cultivate a new class of loyal Islamic businesses, the so-called “Anatolian Tigers.”

Already, the AKP’s “new Turkey” project is in motion and the nature of the transformations that the AKP has initiated suggest that, regardless of who is in power, the repercussions will be felt well into the future.

Shared Ideology, not just Personal Ambition

As Erdoğan’s pursuit of an authoritarian political system has become increasingly bald-faced—with rule of law, civil liberties, and former allies sacrificed in the quest for centralized power—the hope that he would be challenged from within the AKP has become more prominent. But such anticipation of an internal splintering and the emergence of a new leader of the political Islamist movement in Turkey as a means to resolving the political, social, and economic troubles besetting the country presupposes, beyond the possibility that anyone could stand up to Erdoğan, that the country’s direction has been solely determined by him and bears no resemblance to the objectives of the rest of his party.

But while Erdoğan’s personal ambitions and strained relationships among the AKP’s leadership have certainly contributed to the path Turkey has taken in recent years, they are only part of the story. Although Erdoğan’s irritable disposition, blunt methods, and impetuosity might not be traits shared by others within

the AKP, that does not mean that the goals he is working towards are not commonly shared nor informed by a worldview that prevails among the party.

Firstly, the political Islamist movement from which the AKP emerged had been dominated for three decades by a single imperious personality: Necmettin Erbakan. Whether for ideological or structural reasons, this community was used to and susceptible to hierarchical leadership. Erdoğan’s dominance of the AKP parallels Erbakan’s own disputed, but uncontested position.

Moreover, the tactical nature of the AKP’s break from the Islamist parties that had preceded it belies the notion that the authoritarianism and Islamization that has taken place under its rule is an imposition solely of Erdoğan’s will. Indeed, this paper has shown that the evolution away from an anti-democratic, anti-Western, anti-Semitic platform was already taking place under the supervision of Erbakan’s old guard and pre-dates the creation of the AKP. This suggests that the AKP, to a significant degree, was a rebranding of the same ideology that had driven the National Salvation and Welfare Parties. The jettisoning of Erbakan’s most noxious policies was, as the engineer of that rebranding put it, not a change of heart but a tactical retreat until circumstances change:

“The issue is about civilizations. . . there is a meeting, almost a clash of civilizations. On the one hand, there is the Western civilization, on the other hand, the theses that we have defended from the start. . . We are clearly faced with a defeat; our own culture, our own civilization. . . We did not succeed in demonstrating the superiority of our claims, of our theses. But we are happy about the result.”²⁶²

But it was not Erdoğan who devised this rebranding. Instead, it was Abdullah Gül together with Bülent Arınç—those most often looked to as alternatives to Erdoğan—that found a way to make the ambitions of the Milli Görüş politically palatable. Those ambitions, those theses and culture that clash with Western civilization, are a worldview shared by the founders and leaders of the AKP, though

perhaps not all of its members. Disputes within the party might arise about means, but they should not be mistaken for connoting differences in its ultimate goals.

Democracy Misconstrued

The AKP was seen—within Turkey and throughout the West—as a democratizing force not simply because of the policies it espoused. It also played into a diagnosis of the pathologies of Turkey’s political institutions that had become widespread among the liberal intelligentsia throughout the 1990s and was seemingly proven right by the 1997 coup: namely, that there existed a structural opposition and cultural alienation between the Turkish state and society. The rise of the AKP occurred in an intellectual context that was prepared to accept its vision of Turkish Islamic civilization as a democratizing mission.

This leftist and liberal discourse early on located the reasons for Turkey’s political travails during the last two hundred years – the presumed weakness of civil society, as well as the presumed cultural alienation of the popular masses – in the oppression of civil society by an authoritarian state that, according to this narrative, set out to change the culture of the people. The thinking of the Islamic conservatives and of the left converged in identifying the Turkish state as an agent of a Western civilization that allegedly violates the culture, religion and traditions of a Muslim people. Leftist intellectuals, just like their conservative counterparts, thus saw the state as being culturally estranged from the popular masses, indeed, as hostile to the people’s cultural and religious traditions, and identified this as the explanation for the lack of democracy and a free society in Turkey.

But the expectation of liberals that a state defeated by the formerly “oppressed” was going to be a different, democratic state rested on more than a set of assumptions about the “Jacobinism” of the Turkish state. They came to view the AKP as a liberal hope also because liberal and leftist thinking relied on a set of assumptions about the supposed counter-force to the state – the bourgeoisie –

and about the innately emancipating nature of the particular kind of bourgeoisie that was the principal force behind the AKP. Simply put, just like the Marxists, who had expected deliverance for humanity from the proletariat, the Turkish leftist and liberal intelligentsia had come to expect one particular social class – the pious bourgeoisie – to deliver freedom.

But this view of both the pathologies of the Turkish political system and how it might be fixed conflates institutions and culture. The Marxist critique of the state as an imperialist oppressor alienated from Turkish mass society located the failure of democracy to take root in the identity and orientation of the ruling class, not the structures of government itself. The logical conclusion of such thought led liberal intellectuals, themselves hardly representative of the country, in pursuit of something like an authentic Turkish social movement. The fact that they convinced themselves that the AKP—an ideological movement influenced by radical Islamism that had been quite foreign to Turkey until the 1960s—represented the real Turkey shows how out of touch the intellectuals were. By trying to identify a particular social actor that would represent all of Turkey, liberals ignored the plurality of ethnicities, faiths, and identities that constitute modern Turkish society. And this focus on changing the cultural identity of the ruling class, not the legal and institutional framework for of the political system, unsurprisingly only resulted in replacing one set of entrenched elites with a new one, without any enhancement of Turkish democracy.

Implications

Lasting Transformation

Turkey, under the AKP, has already been transformed, just not in the direction promised by the party and envisioned by its champions. Erdoğan and the AKP did manage to break down a sclerotic semi-authoritarian form of government, a “managed democracy” described in Turkey as the “regime of military tutelage.” But what Erdoğan managed to break down was the identity of the informal rulers of this regime, not the structure of the regime itself. In

fact, as soon as Erdoğan had evicted the erstwhile rulers, he immediately began promoting a presidential form of government without checks and balances, a system of one-man rule tailored explicitly to his own person. So far, Erdoğan has failed to implement this system de jure. Yet he has already, for all practical purposes, imposed this system on Turkey — and in the meantime, kept the skeleton of the “tutelage” system, with himself in the driver’s seat.

This erosion of the rule of law and civil liberties will not only continue as long as Erdoğan is in office — regardless, as he has made clear, of the actual composition of the representative government — but could continue under future presidents. Perhaps especially if this de facto autocratic presidency is allowed to persist, unchallenged politically or legally, it will establish a precedent for future holders of the office to invoke. Why would they accept constrained authority once the presidency has been unmoored from the constitution? Indeed, the malignant, authoritarian elements that Erdoğan and the AKP have introduced into Turkey’s political system may linger well into the future.

The Islamization of Turkish society under AKP rule followed a similar trajectory to the growing authoritarianism of the Turkish state: a linear progression that was proportional to the AKP’s domination of politics and political institutions. At this point, the question is how far Erdoğan is willing, or able, to go in his efforts to Islamize Turkey. The policies implemented so far have mainly been either of a symbolic nature, or designed to affect society’s identity in the long-term. These steps are important; but aside from the changes to the educational curriculum, they have not yet translated into substantial coercive measures to ensure that the population abides by Islamic principles. But these types of reforms have a logic of their own, and there is a tendency for more to beget more. If Erdoğan and the AKP remain in power, it is likely only a question of time before coercive elements become apparent.

The problem is that the sort of social changes—to the family, economy, and educational system—that have been taking place under the AKP also have the most lasting effects and can be

the most difficult to undo, playing out on a generational timeline. Unfortunately, the interpretation of religion that is being transmitted through official channels is, increasingly, that of a particular religious order: the understanding of Sunni Islam embraced by the Khalidi Naqshbandi order, with additional ideological influences from the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded movements. That, in turn, is a highly ideological and anti-Western interpretation of Islam, which is bound to make Turkey’s state and society increasingly distant from its Western partners in the years to come. Moreover, it is already proving to be highly divisive in a country where over a third of the population is not Hanafi Sunni Muslim, setting the stage for protracted social and political conflict, even without the AKP in power.

Legacy of Polarization and Instability

The first decade of the AKP’s rule was accompanied by economic growth and the promise of a peace process that would greatly ameliorate the Kurdish problem. But its legacy will be the complete opposite. Erdoğan and the AKP have put Turkey at risk of protracted internal instability.

One of Erdoğan’s main legacies will likely be the de-institutionalization and personalization of power in Turkey. A key difference between the “tutelage” regime and the present one is that the former was built around a system of institutions. That did not necessarily make it democratic, but it did make it predictable and relatively stable. By contrast, Erdoğan has systematically undermined Turkey’s institutions, including democratic ones like the parliament, informalized power, divorcing it from any legal or institutional framework, and concentrated it in his own hands. The system he is building is therefore considerably more volatile than its predecessor.

Second, Erdoğan’s foreign policy has already begun to make Turkey look like Pakistan in the 1990s—with blowback from foreign adventurism already taking its toll on Turkey, belying any notion of the country as a beacon of stability in its region. The

price tag for Ankara's instrumental use of extremist groups for foreign policy purposes is likely to be staggeringly high. Third, Erdoğan has thrived on polarization: conservatives vs. secularists; Sunnis vs. Alevis; and now Turks vs. Kurds—deepening existing cleavages in a society already characterized by extremely low levels of societal trust.

Fourth, in particular, Erdoğan's willingness to play with Turkey's most fundamental internal conflict—the Kurdish problem—for short-term political gain has done more than anything to destabilize the country. After having raised expectations that a solution would be found, his decision to move to crush the Kurdish nationalist movement after the June 2015 elections could have repercussions that might make it impossible to ever restore the legitimacy of the central government for many of Turkey's Kurds. In short, Erdoğan's policies have made Turkey increasingly unstable and raised the risk of the country's multiple cleavages spinning out of control.

U.S.-Turkish Partnership Trivialized

The challenge facing U.S. policymakers dealing with Turkey is balancing short-term tactical priorities with long-term strategic ones. However, with an increasingly complicated sectarian conflict metastasizing through the region, U.S. policy has more often than not focused on immediate regional challenges, and the role Ankara could play in them, rather than on the political and social developments unfolding within Turkey. As a result, Turkey's ideological drift took place within the broader context of U.S. encouragement of Turkish designs. Now, what was once a strategic partnership has been reduced to, at best, an instrumental relationship.

The Obama administration's half-hearted policies in the region contributed to reinforcing the Turkish leadership's ambitions, while simultaneously entrenching their conspiratorial perceptions. Initially, the administration's seeming intention to subcontract much of Middle Eastern policy to Turkey swelled ambitions in Ankara. Later, the United States equivocated on Syrian and Egyptian issues

to an extent that allowed wild conspiracy theories to dominate the thinking in Turkey on U.S. intentions.

The aloofness of American policy had the unintended side effect of simultaneously leading Turkey to think it could achieve its objectives of regional leadership under American cover; that it could get away with liaisons with jihadi groups across the region in achieving those objectives; but also that America was conspiring with the regime's enemies to undermine the rise of a powerful Turkey ruled by Islamic conservatives.

The result has been the simultaneous shift of Turkish foreign policy and interests out of alignment with those of the United States and the loss of U.S. leverage over Ankara. For evidence of how this dynamic has made U.S.-Turkish cooperation more difficult with devastating effect for the region, one need look no further than the year that Washington spent seeking greater Turkish support in the fight against the Islamic State only to have its agreement with Ankara be exploited by Erdoğan to restart the conflict with the PKK.

Given the extent and direction of the transformation that has already taken place in Turkey, it is time for U.S. policymakers to begin paying attention not to how Ankara might help resolve the challenges confronting the Middle East, but how it might add to them. Rather than a model for its neighbors to emulate, Turkey is becoming a model of the problems plaguing the rest of the region.

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