

An Islamist Vision

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As previously explained in this space, Turkey—heir of the Ottoman Empire—is reawakening and stretching its geopolitical muscles after lying dormant for 90 years (see "Turkey: a Resurging Pivotal Power," *Forerunner*, November-December 2007). But in reasserting itself and spreading its influence, it is also having to determine what it wants to become. This question of identity and direction is creating a constitutional crisis with profound implications for Europe and the Middle East.

To understand what is occurring, one must go back nearly a century. In 1923, in the aftermath of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) led a secular revolution that established the present Republic of Turkey. In doing so, he abolished the caliphate (Islamic empire) that had existed for centuries and removed Shari'a (Muslim law) courts, as well as other elements of Islamic legal and religious orders. An admirer of the Enlightenment, Atatürk sought to transform Turkey into a progressive, democratic, and secular nation-state. Because Islamism had been such a strong feature of the Empire, and would likely return if left unopposed, Atatürk made the Turkish military the guarantor of the secular state, grounding this in the republic's constitution.

For the last few years, though, the debate over Islam within Turkish government and society has grown increasingly louder. Approximately 98% of Turkey's 74 million citizens are Muslim (of varying degrees of orthodoxy), and it should be remembered that Islam is more than just another religion. In Koranic Islam, there is no concept of a "separation of mosque and state." Thus a secular Islamic state is ultimately a contradiction in terms, and a large portion of the populace is not content with a governmental system that does not rule according to Islamic law or support Islamic ideals.

Turkey's current ruling party is the Islamist-rooted Justice & Development Party (AKP). While the AKP and Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, pay lip-service to the country's secular tradition, it is no secret that they are trying to move the nation away from said secularism. "You cannot be secular and a Muslim at the same time," Erdogan said in a speech in 1995. In the same speech, he revealed that his vision is not limited merely to placating the Turkish populace: "The world's 1.5 billion Muslims are waiting for the Turkish people to rise up. We will rise up."

The AKP has been positioning itself as a bridge between the Western and Islamic worlds. While expanding its influence toward all compass points, it is having the most success in the Muslim world. Since Turkey has made little headway in being accepted into the European Union, it has turned its gaze from the West—and the secularism inherent within it—back toward the East, where it previously held great sway in the Turkic countries of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It is likewise increasingly active in the Middle East, warming up to Muslim nations like Syria and Iran, and slowly distancing itself from its historical ally, Israel.

Part of Turkey's changing heart stems from the passing of the generation most familiar with—and supportive of—Atatürk's ideas, while the younger generation is not so vehemently secular. Much of this is because of the Gülen Movement, part political machine and part shadowy Islamist sect that backs the AKP (though some contend that it is the ruling force behind the AKP). Founded in the 1970s by Fethullah Gülen, a charismatic preacher who now lives in the United States but remains

popular in Turkey, the movement aims to reshape secular Turkey in its own image by securing the supremacy of Gülen's version of Islam over Turkish life.

The core of his network is educational. An estimated 75% percent of Turkey's two million preparatory school students are enrolled in Gülen institutions, and he also controls thousands of top-tier secondary schools, colleges, and student dormitories throughout Turkey—and 110 other countries. While these educational institutions are not technically *madrassahs* (Islamic theology schools), neither are they secular. While they are not stocked with fire-breathing imams convincing children to detonate themselves, they have played a large role in systematizing Islamic instruction in Turkey, as well as schooling an entire generation (or more) in Gülen's anti-Atatürk vision.

Gülen's vision of Islam is more philosophical and humanistic than militaristic—"we are first human, then Muslim"—but even so, he has his eye on overturning the status quo in Turkey. Though his writings sound moderate, even agreeable, to many Western progressives, all is not as it seems—he told followers in a 1999 TV broadcast that "every method and path is acceptable [including] lying to people." Over time, his followers have penetrated every stratum of Turkish life, many into the highest positions: governors, judges, military officers, police commissioners, security directors, and other high-ranking officials. Now Islamists in Turkey's government are indirectly beginning to challenge the military—the secular state's protector.

In 2007, the AKP devised an elaborate conspiracy theory that allowed the arrest of about two hundred AKP critics, including military officers, under accusation of plotting to overthrow the elected government. After a second alleged military coup was "uncovered" in early 2010, hundreds more critics of the AKP and active and retired military officers were arrested, including former heads of the air force and navy—many simply for the sake of intimidation. The AKP and Gülen's followers have thus gained the means to harass the dominant secularists and silence critics of the Islamist vision.

The military is at a crossroads: Either quietly submit to the AKP's direction and hope for a different government in the next election, or else stage a real *coup d'état*, which will likely increase the Islamists' electoral strength. Either way, momentum favors the Islamists—and a Turkey whose government is again Islamist will change the dynamics throughout Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. As history shows, an Islamist vision sets its sights on the whole world.