

The New Crescent Moon in the Islamist Firmament

By Hillel Fradkin

IT IS NOW UNDENIABLY CLEAR THAT SINCE 2002 THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY has been headed in a decidedly new direction that is markedly different from all precedents in its history. This has had and still has potentially far-reaching implications on multiple levels—for the country of Turkey itself, for Turkey’s role within the regional framework of states, for Turkey’s role as a member in the NATO Alliance and its future relations with the European Union, and for its impact on Turkish and perhaps other Muslim minority communities in Europe. Turkey’s new course has also had a potentially profound effect on the movement of Islamic reform known as Islamism.

Turkey was launched on its new course with the elections of 2002, when AKP (Justice and Development Party) secured a majority in the Turkish Parliament. In 2003 the party’s leader, Recep Tayip Erdogan, became prime minister. In the 2007 elections AKP held onto control of the parliament with an even larger majority. In 2011, Turkey will hold another general election and, at the present time, it appears likely that AKP will win this one as well.

AKP’s rise to power has from the beginning inspired both very great hopes and very great fears among outside observers—not to mention among Turks themselves. These hopes and fears have had a twofold focus: on the Republic of Turkey’s future as both a perennially powerful state within the Greater Middle East region and a long time member of the NATO Alliance and the informal alliance of Western states more generally; and on the Turkish Republic’s future in its role as the most successful modern Muslim majority state within the new circumstances created by the rising importance in the Muslim world of the Islamist movement, including its many varieties or strands. The latter focus was of course particularly connected with the fact that AKP has ideological roots

in the Islamist movement—particularly in the Muslim Brotherhood variety—as well as in earlier Islamic Turkish parties, which had previously been suppressed and disbanded by the Kemalist state.

One especially powerful hope was that AKP's rise to power might help create a new "Islamic Model"—one that would offer an influential and yet benign alternative to the Islamism of the jihadi-terrorist variety as well as to other Salafist strands, including the political and religious doctrinarism of the Muslim Brotherhood. A premise of this hope was that the vitality of the Islamist movement and the more general worldwide revival of Islamic religious sensibilities (a development some forty years in the making) were here to stay for the foreseeable future, and that the prospects for simply and strictly secular democratic processes in the Muslim world, in accord with the globalizing trends taking place in the rest of the contemporary world, were not promising and could not be relied upon. The reasoning behind this premise seemed only to be confirmed by the fact that AKP itself rose to power within Turkey—the first modern Muslim republic, which had been founded on expressly secular principles, and which, by all modern standards, was enormously successful. Because AKP's rise occurred through genuinely democratic processes, it was hoped that the party's governance might achieve a blending of religious and modern democratic impulses sufficient to produce a moderate and civil "Islamist politics" that could, in turn, be both successful in its own right and also serve as an ideological alternative to and check upon Islamism's more radical and dangerous trends. (This optimistic assessment seemed validated, among other things, by AKP's apparent capacity to draw Turkey's more traditional and religiously conservative social groups into a new middle class and the modern mainstream.) The hope that Turkey could become a model of Islamic democracy seemed plausible, especially given Turkey's prestige in the wider Muslim world, which derives both from the country's success as an economically dynamic democracy and also from its being the heir of the Ottoman Empire, the last great pre-modern Muslim state. Moreover, Turkey's historically-rooted connections with Europe, as well as its ongoing pursuit of entry into the European Union, held out the prospect that AKP's Turkey might serve as an intercultural bridge that could facilitate more peaceful and mutually advantageous relations between the Islamic Middle East and the West.

Alternatively, AKP's rise in 2002 also aroused deep anxieties. It was feared that AKP's seemingly more moderate Islamist stance only concealed an underlying radical theocratic agenda that would emerge domestically as the party consolidated its rule, and that this agenda would lead increasingly to autocratic government in Ankara. There were additional concerns that the AKP government might even encourage and support radical Islamic states and movements, and that a more hostile divide between the Muslim world and the West would develop.

After nearly a decade of AKP rule, answers to the many questions about the party's present

and future trajectory may still remain somewhat ambiguous and may remain so for some considerable time longer. Prime Minister Erdogan as well as other AKP officials are veterans of earlier Turkish Islamist parties and their failures to maintain power. Accordingly, he has proceeded relatively slowly and cautiously in presenting his agenda for AKP's government and his own understanding of its deepest and widest implications.

NEVERTHELESS, IT HAS BECOME CLEAR THAT AKP'S EXERCISE OF POWER TO date now justifies more of the fears than hopes described above in a variety of ways. Especially since its second electoral victory in 2007, AKP's domestic agenda has, in fact, become increasingly autocratic as the party has moved effectively to suppress and stifle the opposition it has encountered and the institutions in which this opposition resided, such as the independent judiciary, the military and the media. The AKP government has accomplished this in part through legislation, including most recently a referendum on constitutional amendments that sharply diminished the independence of the judiciary and the military. Moreover, the AKP government has ruled by intimidation, through judicial proceedings of dubious legality and merit taken against the media, and through suspicious prosecutions of influential military officers, including the so-called "Ergenekon Affair," which allegedly involved a prospective military coup. At least some of the documents that are the basis of this prosecution seem to be forgeries.

It has been argued with some reason that the history of modern Turkish politics offers many prior examples of Turkish governments and parties that engaged in the corruption of democratic processes and that AKP is only continuing this lamentable tradition. But however much this may be true, it remains the case that the AKP government has not fulfilled the hopes for a genuinely "democratic Islamist politics" capable of serving as a worthy model for the future. Moreover, in light of AKP's roots in the Islamist movement—which has never provided a clear affirmation of liberal democratic principles—the party's behavior is necessarily more suspect than the party's secular predecessors. To the extent that AKP continues toward autocracy and inspires other Islamic parties elsewhere, it may indeed become an example for Islamist politics—albeit a model of how to democratically acquire power and then corrupt democratic principles, institutions, and practices for anti-democratic purposes.

But it is perhaps in the sphere of foreign policy that the AKP government has thus far proven to have the most dramatic and worrisome impact on contemporary Muslim world politics and their future dynamics. While Prime Minister Erdogan and his colleagues continue to claim that Turkey remains a bridge between East and West, much else of what they say and a great deal of what they do belies this. In particular, they have abandoned Turkey's traditionally guarded and, at times, antagonistic relations

with radical states and movements in the Middle East, and they instead have chosen to establish friendly relations with these radical actors. This began with the warm welcome Erdogan extended in 2005 to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then the newly elected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This embrace has been extended and deepened in the years since. Given Iran's declared fundamental hostility to the West and its principles, Ankara's warming relations with the Islamic Republic have increasingly put Turkey at odds with its ostensible Western allies—most obviously in the struggle over Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Correlatively, Turkey has also drawn closer to Syria, an Iranian client and formerly a state with which Turkey has experienced hostilities, as well as the Sudan of Omar al-Bashir.

AN IMPORTANT COROLLARY OF THESE DEVELOPMENTS HAS BEEN THE relationship between Turkey and Israel. Both countries have long had friendly diplomatic relations and have cooperated in military and security affairs. Under AKP's rule, however, these relations have deteriorated rapidly. Erdogan has extended a warm embrace to Hamas—the Palestinian organization dedicated by its charter to the destruction of Israel—especially since its victory in the Palestinian elections of 2006 and its seizure of control of Gaza from the Palestinian Authority in 2007. In 2008, Israel sought to suppress regular rocket fire from Gaza (Hamas had stockpiled thousands of missiles) by launching a military operation called “Operation Cast Lead.” Erdogan declared his opposition to this effort and then went out of his way to publicly humiliate Israeli President Shimon Peres at a joint panel at the 2009 Davos Forum.

This was followed in 2010 by the Gaza Flotilla Incident, which began as an attempt by an Islamist activist organization with close ties to Turkish elites, including purportedly with AKP officials, to break the arms blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel. When Israel intercepted the flotilla, violence ensued leaving nine activists dead. The AKP government has since sought to use the incident to delegitimize Israel and its security policy altogether, with Erdogan accusing Jerusalem, among other things, of “state terrorism.”

All of this has pushed Erdogan, AKP, and the Republic of Turkey as a whole closer and closer to the radical camp in the Middle East and farther away from Turkey's traditional Western alliances and European orientation. Indeed, Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, architect of its foreign policy and long time proponent of a regional orientation—the so-called “zero problems” policy—has recently expressed relative disinterest in the process of Turkey's E.U. accession. Turkey's move towards the regional radical camp—comprised of Iran, Syria, Hamas, and other actors—has raised important questions over its impact on dynamics within Islamism.

It was noteworthy that as a result of the Gaza Flotilla Incident, AKP-ruled Turkey and Erdogan earned very high praise from Ayman al-Zawahiri, the deputy head and

theoretician of al-Qaeda. This was particularly noteworthy because the Salafi-jihadist wing of the Islamist movement, represented by al-Qaeda and others, has been famously critical of the Muslim Brotherhood wing in which AKP has its roots. The Salafist wing is also well-known for its critical and sometimes violent hostility toward Shiism, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, with which Turkey maintains ever closer relations. Despite this, Zawahiri not only praised AKP for its role in the flotilla affair but also expressed appreciation for the many hundreds of years of Turkish leadership of the Muslim world—especially under the Ottomans.

AKP's Turkey thus seems to enjoy great prestige among Islamists, that for the time being apparently transcends the very sharp divides within the movement between Shiite and Sunni and between the Salafi-jihadist and Brotherhood wings. This potentially enables Turkey to have enormous influence on the future course of Islamism. The revolutionary protests now sweeping through the Arab world have reinforced this possibility and the questions it raises. This prospect was most immediately raised first by events in Tunisia and still more for the same reason by the events in Egypt. Both countries, though Egypt more so than Tunisia, have long been strongholds of the Muslim Brotherhood. The fall of Mubarak in Egypt and the prospective opening of the political arena led to the prospect of a major role for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, as well as fears of what that might portend. In particular, the fear was raised that the Brotherhood might seek and achieve a theocratic Islamic state akin to and ideologically linked with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed, Egyptian Brotherhood leaders and Iranian leaders have exchanged warm if still limited expressions of mutual respect in the past, as well as during the Egyptian events. But Egyptian Brotherhood leaders were also quick to deny that they had in mind the "Iranian model." Instead they, as well as Tunisian Brotherhood leaders, have declared their admiration for the "Turkish Model," the model of Turkey under AKP governance.

More generally, there have been numerous statements and articles offering the opinion that Turkey is the new leader of the region, and Ankara is increasingly looked to for assistance and instruction. For their part, Erdogan and his colleagues have not been shy in offering their support for some of the protest movements, and they have also opined on their requirements.

Of course, since all these circumstances are in great flux and will remain so for some time, it is impossible to know what the eventual impact of Turkey will be both on the regional order of states and on the Islamist movement. But it is safe to say that for the foreseeable future, the question of Turkey and of the "Turkish model"—what it is, its merits or demerits, its successes or failures from an Islamist standpoint—will be the pole around which a great deal of regional politics and intra-Islamist discussion will revolve.