

Current Trends in Islamist Ideology

VOLUME 11

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- ARAB ISLAMISM AND THE “TURKISH MODEL” / *Hassan Mneimneh*
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HUDSON INSTITUTE

*Center on Islam, Democracy, and
the Future of the Muslim World*

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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.

The “Turkish Model” in Arab Islamism: Rejection or Emulation?

By Hassan Mneimneh

THE REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATIONS SWEEPING ACROSS THE contemporary Arab world have already necessitated a fundamental reset of the analytical framework applied to understanding developments in the region. For the first time in many decades, Islamism is no longer the prominent form of oppositional political expression. Instead, from Morocco to Oman and Syria to Yemen, the political language of the protestors is imbued with universal rather than religious principles, and the slogans of the protest movements are calling for greater freedom, empowerment, and dignity, not the “Islamic solution.” This new political expression solemnly declares that it is the people¹—and *not* the dogmatic Sharia of the Islamists—who are sovereign and the source of political legitimacy and authority.

While Islamism had for many decades dominated Arab activist political discourse, the transformations underway have all exposed the underlying reality of Islamism’s inadequacy, including its basic unrepresentativeness of Arab societies and their aspirations. The potential for a fatal setback for Islamism is thus considerable. While they were surprised and overtaken by recent events, Islamist movements of all types—whether they were liberal, accommodationist, conservative, radical, or violent—are now actively engaging in efforts to reclaim the initiative by proclaiming their support for the protests and revolutions, by positioning themselves as participants in the social change, and by

revising their own history and ideological pronouncements so as to lay claim to the dramatic changes that are now taking place.² As of now, non-Islamists still have the upper hand. But should the Islamist movements succeed in their bid to outmaneuver their competitors in the new political landscape, the chances of an Islamist comeback and revolutionary takeover are indeed significant.³

Islamism's accommodationist stream, which is represented best by the regional constellation of groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, is the dominant school of Islamism in the Arab world and also the Islamist strain best situated to influence the ongoing political transformations of the region. This movement possesses a number of political tools and strategies in its arsenal for acquiring power and influence, though few are as valuable and as potent as what has been called the "Turkish model." While Islamists have previously used the "Turkish model" with their Western interlocutors as a means to alleviate fears over the incompatibility between Islamism and democracy, the "Turkish model" has acquired a new importance in the developing conversation between Islamists and non-Islamists in newly free Arab societies. This is especially the case in those contexts where the preeminent tone of the political discussion has stressed the importance of constructing a civil, democratic, and non-sectarian political order. Islamists thus profess adherence to the "Turkish model" as an antidote to the suspicion among non-Islamists that the sole course Islamists follow is one premised on a fundamental incompatibility between Islamism and democracy.

An Elusive Definition

THE MAIN INTELLECTUAL ENERGIES OF MODERN ARAB ISLAMISM AND OF ISLAMISM more generally have not been devoted to the cultivation of theoretical or practical thinking about social, political, or economic affairs. Indeed, all of these areas of human thought and practice were underdeveloped in the Islamic scholastic tradition that Islamism appropriated for itself, and this has meant that modern Islamist intellectuals had very little to build upon. Instead, Arab Islamist political theory has focused its energies largely on identity construction and on the political reformulation of Islamic theology. While "Islam," as understood by Islamists, is posited as the "Solution" to all that ails the Umma in the modern world, different Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, have not produced a body of practical thinking about politics and economics that rises to Islamism's utopian claims of comprehensiveness. While Islamists have incessantly disputed the best strategies and methods for acquiring political power, the topic of specifically governing has rarely been broached. The few attempts by civic-accommodationist Islamist thinkers, such as Hasan al-Turabi of Sudan and Rashid al-Ghanouchi of Tunisia, to formulate the outlines of a functional model of governance

have consistently been rejected by conservative and radical Islamists for their purported inconsistency with the undefined Islamist ideals of the Islamic State and Sharia.

Given the scholastic tradition's lack of substantive precedents and the constant pressure from Islamism's more ideologically intransigent ranks, Islamist thinkers who have sought to develop a theory and public discourse on democracy and modern governance have had limited options. Arab Islamism has therefore tended to look elsewhere for "success stories" and for workable models that could be replicated in the Arab context. Two models in particular have been most commonly referenced. The first is the "Malaysian model,"⁴ which has generally been disadvantaged in Arab Islamist circles due to Malaysia's geographical and cultural remoteness, and the second is the "Turkish model."

There is no consensus in Arab Islamist circles on the "Turkish model," on its practical applicability within Arab societies, or even on its definition and essential characteristics.⁵ Instead, Arab Islamist discussion on the "Turkish model" has ranged widely, according both to the unique Arab locale where the model is invoked and also according to the Islamist movement that is referencing it. Because of the unfolding protests and revolutions across the region, the Arab Islamist discussion on the "Turkish model" can only be expected to undergo further alterations in the future. Still, in both Tunisia and in Egypt where actual revolutions have required a re-conceptualization of the social pact and political order, the "Turkish model" is already in currency and is already used to bolster and justify various positions—including conflicting ones.

In its most popular and clearly defined usage, Arab Islamists link the "Turkish model" with the rise to power and continued rule since 2002 of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP) in the democratic Republic of Turkey. The implicit idea in this Arab perspective is that AKP is at its core an Islamist movement that has managed to constitute itself as a modern party not only to acquire power but also to maintain its power and wield it effectively over time in a democratic political order. In this perspective, the "Turkish model" thus represents a form of Islamism that is compatible with the democratic process that is able to deliver and that is granted due recognition and legitimacy both in Turkey and internationally.

Arab Islamists also see AKP as a model for the project of Islamization. Since AKP is heir to a chain of religiously conservative as well as Islamist Turkish political parties, Arab Islamists often view Turkey's ruling party as being engaged in the initial stages of a long-term "stealth" project whose purpose is to reclaim Turkish society and bring it back to Islam. Of course, AKP itself rejects this characterization, insisting that it is not an Islamist movement but an economically liberal and socially conservative center-right party that is, in important ways, modeled on the modern Christian democratic parties that emerged in twentieth century Europe. Since AKP's rise has occurred within Kemalist Turkey and against the backdrop of a long history of official and institutional hostility to Islamic politics, Arab Islamists are generally not persuaded by AKP's claims. Instead,

they have understood AKP's silence on matters of concern to Islamists, and also AKP's sporadic pronouncements about its character as a non-Islamist political party, as temporary political necessities designed to conceal the party's true identity and intentions. Meanwhile, the dramatic social and semiotic rehabilitation of Islam in Turkey since AKP came to power (particularly through the normalization of the veil), as well as what has been widely regarded as Turkey's gradual but unmistakable political realignment away from its traditional allies, the United States, Europe, and Israel, and toward states like Iran and Syria, are sufficient proof for Arab Islamists that AKP's "stealth project" is indeed underway.

In such assessments of the "Turkish model," Arab Islamists are effectively in agreement with secular Kemalist critics of AKP who also accuse the party of concealing a hidden Islamist agenda. In its regular engagements with Arab audiences, AKP's leadership frequently maintains a fine line between its actions and statements that helps to nurture the popular impression of its crypto-Islamism.⁶ Through this outreach, AKP has arguably sought to secure its Islamist constituencies at home and enhance Turkish soft power abroad in Arab and Islamist circles, all the while maintaining a level of plausible deniability with respect to the accusations leveled against the party by its critics.

A Utilitarian Character

TODAY, BUT ALSO PRIOR TO THE DRAMATIC CHANGES UNDERWAY IN ARAB POLITICS, AKP's success in repeating its electoral victories, overcoming legal and constitutional challenges, and securing persistent economic growth, the recourse to the "Turkish model" in Arab Islamism is primarily a utilitarian and tactical action—not a strategic one.

Arab Islamism often presumes itself to be superior to and far more advanced than its Turkish counterpart. The secularizing initiatives of Arab socialism had largely dissipated because of the discrediting of the Arab revolutionary regimes in the 1970s, and secularism as a whole lost its appeal for many who were trapped under the subsequently dismal rule of increasingly autocratic and kleptocratic Arab governments—whether monarchic, revolutionary, military, or "republican." Whether in Iraq, where considerable legal gains for women were reversed by the Saddam Hussein regime following its rediscovery of the formidable power of religious totalitarianism, or in Tunisia, where the combination of forcibly secularist ideology and political repression obfuscated the native social foundations of the secular tradition, Islamists were soon able to dominate the oppositional discourse by injecting it with their ideological assertion that secularism is a Western import that is inconsistent with Muslim mores, values, and principles. Irrespective of the validity of the convictions, Arab Islamists claimed for their cultures and societies an essential

religious character in ways that were simply unattainable by their Turkish counterparts. In the Turkish setting, AKP went to considerable lengths to distance itself from any religious labeling, lest the deeply rooted secular Kemalist state disenfranchise it (as had happened to the Islamic parties that preceded AKP). In the Arab setting, the religious label was solemnly proclaimed by Islamist movements, and the regimes, partly in response to their Islamist opposition, strived to assert their own religious credentials and authority. In the Turkish setting, a woman wearing the veil was under pressure and scrutiny from the state and dominant culture; in Arab societies, women not wearing the veil felt increasingly intimidated.

While Arab Islamism in the modern era has exhibited an array of expressions—ranging from accommodation to irredentism and from populism to elitism—not a single Arab Islamist movement or formulation has ever advocated for a reduction of the place of religion in Arab society and culture. In the Islamist assessment, Arab societies may indeed be deficient in their embrace and practice of “Islam” (as understood by Islamism). Nonetheless, from an Islamist perspective, the place and status of the religion in Arab life remains far more “advanced” than in the hostile, secularist conditions Islam faces in the Turkish context, even with AKP in power. Thus, when Arab Islamists invoke the “Turkish model,” they do not posit it as an object of emulation in its entirety. It is primarily the adaptability of AKP to adverse conditions and its ability to survive and sustain its position of power in the context of hostile state structures and political culture that serve as a model. A crucial difference, from the Arab Islamists’ own assessment, is that the hostility to Islamism in Arab contexts stems from autocratic rulers propped-up by foreign powers and not—as it is in the Turkish case—from the local societies and culture.

The character of the protests that spread through the region beginning in December 2010 should have shaken people of this conviction altogether. Movements sprang up that appeared to be leaderless, largely spontaneous, and that championed principles that were decidedly non-Islamist, including freedom, empowerment, dignity, “people power,” national pride, and inter-religious community. The non-Islamist character of these protests caught the Islamists, together with all established political forces, by utter surprise. The absence in the protests of the familiar Islamist themes—such as “Islam as the Solution,” anti-Americanism, or the Palestinian cause—has spurred some Islamists to reappraise their societies and political cultures, as well as their positions as Islamists within them. At this early stage, the Islamists’ reassessments have displayed a considerable degree of adaptation to the new realities and politics of the Arab world through the embrace of the protests and their slogans.⁷ As of yet, however, these reappraisals do not contain any substantive explanation why Islamism’s prior *dawa* efforts to indoctrinate the population appears to have failed.

In fact, Arab Islamists have skirted the problem of their contemporary failure altogether. Just as they assume that AKP (despite the party’s claims to the contrary) is an

Islamist movement that is concealing a hidden agenda, the Islamist re-readings of the Arab protests likewise imply that these social movements are, at root, secretly Islamist but that these populations are engaged in a collective dissimulation of their ideological character.⁸ The crucial question as to why the Arab protest movements are currently hiding their true ideological bent—or for that matter, how a decentralized, if not leaderless, mass movement could implement and enforce such dissimulation in the first place—have remained conveniently sidelined in Arab Islamist discourse.

On the face of it, the belief that the Arab movements are hiding their true ideological and political ambitions reflects a degree of denial or self-deception about the reality of the political changes that are occurring in Arab societies. It may also be understood as an effort by the Islamists to avoid publicly embarrassing and internally weakening debate over why the Islamist movement has not been the primary author of this political change. Moreover, it also appears to be a deliberate effort to avoid outright conflict in the presently fluid situation, so as to best place Islamists in positions where they can usher still unfolding and malleable developments in directions consistent with the Islamist vision.

Indeed, a multitude of actors in the Islamic world and also in the West have already claimed credit for the Arab protests and revolutions, with the clear hope of shaping the future tenor of this overall political transformation. According to the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the 1979 Iranian revolution served as the model and inspiration for the current Arab protests, which are signs of a widespread “Islamic Awakening.”⁹ The Iranian opposition, meanwhile, saw them as an echo of its own mass demonstrations in 2009 against the Islamic Republic’s harsh rule.¹⁰ In fractured Lebanon, the two feuding political coalitions have also claimed paternity for the protest movements. The Arab uprisings are thus either a continuation of the pro-liberation and democratic 2005 Cedar Revolution, or they are a manifestation of a sense of empowerment engendered by Hezbollah’s battle with Israel in 2006.

In the U.S., conservatives have argued that the protests are a vindication of the Bush Administration’s pro-democracy agenda,¹¹ while liberals credit the words of President Obama for having been a motivation and inspiration. Google, Facebook, Twitter, Wikileaks, and the writings of non-violence advocate, Gene Sharp, have all been proposed as instrumental.

AKP, which has strived to put their own mark on regional affairs, has itself not been able to resist the temptation of laying claim to the upheavals in the Arab world. According to the Turkish Prime Minister and leader of AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the inspiration was evidently Turkey and its “advanced democracy.”¹² The use of the AKP claim in internal Turkish politics notwithstanding, Islamists of various persuasions have instrumentalized the numerous opportunities in the Arab context. However, the Turkish claim in particular may have a special impact on intra-Arab discussions, and it may be integrated into the current Arab Islamist narrative about Turkey and the “Turkish model.”

A Conflicted Narrative

ISLAMISM IS THE PRODUCTIVE GRAND NARRATIVE THAT HAS DOMINATED THE political discourse of Arab opposition movements since the late 1970s. It traces its immediate origins to the fusion of two currents of Islamic thought. The first of these currents is the political theology of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which emphasizes activism (in the form of *dawa*, education, or jihad) over pietism as the main characteristic and obligation of truly Islamic life. The second tendency is the Saudi Wahhabi-Salafist stipulation that political legitimacy resides exclusively in a fixed Islamic framework. In this stream, political sovereignty belongs only and indivisibly to God; all modern forms of government, whether formed on the basis of popular will or tyranny, are thus un-Islamic and illegitimate. The fusion of the Brotherhood activism imperative and the Salafist teaching on exclusive legitimacy has manifested in many variants with different emphasis. Over time, some of these Islamist formulations have proven more stable and durable than others.

In the 1970s, Islamism was propelled to the fore of Arab political discourse through the defeat and retreat of secular Arab nationalism and socialism. The Arab nationalist project emphasized a historical periodization that allocated the centuries of Ottoman rule to an era of decline; this was preceded by an Arab “Golden Age” and was ostensibly followed in the post-colonial modern era by an Arab Renaissance. The denigration of the Ottoman past was an essential component of Arab nationalist efforts to build up new national identities; it was required especially for the transition from the Ottoman-era conceit of a collective Islamic Umma—which included Turks, Persians, Muslims, and Muslim Arabs, but which excluded Christians, Jews, and other non-Muslims—to an Arab national Umma—which reversed the previous pattern of exclusion and inclusion, with non-Arabs out and non-Muslim Arabs in. Naturally, this politically-driven denigration of the Ottoman past was most pronounced in Arab locales where religious diversity was more manifest, particularly in the Levant but also in Egypt and Iraq. In contrast, in the religiously, mostly homogeneous Maghreb, the transition was superfluous; Arab and Muslim identity labels were and remained largely interchangeable (until the more recent emergence of assertive Amazigh, or Berber, nationalism).

With the decline in the latter part of the 20th Century of Arab nationalism and the concomitant rise of Islamist political discourse, the rehabilitation of the Ottoman episode in Arab history might have been expected. However, the renewed political importance in Arab Islamist discourse of things Ottoman—including the conceit of the transnational Islamic Umma—was hampered by two complicating factors, both of which were tied to Arab Islamist perceptions of modern Turkey. First, prior to the successive rise

in the 1980s of the Turkish Welfare and Virtue parties (both precursors of AKP), Turkey was widely viewed as the embodiment of aggressive secularism, and this of course was anathema to Arab Islamism. Second, the institutional veneration within Turkey of the modern republic's founder, Kemal Ataturk, was widely understood to be the aspiration of secular Arab autocrats, Arab Islamism's declared enemies. Since a rehabilitation of the Ottoman legacy would reflect positively on modern Turkey, and since this would help to validate potentially counter-productive elements, Arab Islamism was certainly not inclined to appropriate the Ottoman legacy wholesale.

The Arab nationalists' dissociation between Arab and Turkish history and identity thus preserved its value for Islamists, albeit for different political ends. Furthermore, despite Islamist assertions to the contrary, Islamist doctrine has never been devoid of nationalist influences. Both 19th century Egypt and the Saudi-Wahhabi Kingdom in the 18th and 19th centuries had entered into bitter conflicts with the Ottoman Sultanate. The enmities these historical conflicts engendered were subsequently exploited by 20th century nationalists (who explained these historical rivalries as evidence of proto-nationalist stands) to reinforce the distinction between Arab and Turk. This originally nationalist formulation further fed the emergence of provincial and parochial identities and ultimately outlived its nationalist authors.

These parochial cultures and identities were subsequently inserted into and also camouflaged by Arab Islamist doctrinal propositions. To many Salafis, for example, who were socialized in the Saudi-Wahhabi heritage, aversion to things Ottoman and Turkish expressed itself through the rejection and hatred of Sufism, which had flourished in Ottoman times. In Egyptian Islamist discourse, the corruption of the Ottoman State, its pro-Western economic and political orientation in its latter days, and the empire's almost willing subjugation by European powers justified the continued denigration of the Ottoman era and Kemalist republic.¹³

Modern Arab Islamism, like the Arab nationalist movement before it, has also utilized a tripartite periodization of Islamic history—dividing it into a Golden Age, an era of humiliating weakness and decline, and a contemporary reemergence or revival. Islamism has, however, produced two versions of political historiography—one minimalist and one maximalist. In the minimalist version, the Golden Age extended only for a few decades after the death of the Prophet, and it was followed by a protracted, millennium-long corruption of the original Islamic state and religion. Corrective actions, the Islamists maintained, were thus undertaken in the modern era by the Islamic revival movement. In the maximalist version, the Golden Age lasted for the near totality of worldwide Islamic history, which ended only in 1924 when Kemal Ataturk abolished the Caliphate and created the modern Turkish Republic. In this telling of history, the Islamist movement is the restorative force that emerged to put an end to the original aberration and injustice of western-imposed modernity.

Liberal and accommodationist Islamists are generally in agreement with the maximalist version of Islamic history, while most radical Islamists lean towards the minimalist version. While the Salafist movement, the main expression of radical Islamism, has consistently sought to stifle what it deems as deviance in ideology and historical understanding and thus adheres to the minimalist version, the embrace of the maximalist version by al-Qaeda,¹⁴ the principal violent Salafi network, may have been intended to defuse futile disputes about history that were dividing the jihad movement and to refocus the energy on broad mobilization. The by-product of this, however, was the removal of an obstacle within Arab Islamist discourse to sympathetic assessments of the Ottoman Empire.

As a consequence, the full rehabilitation of the Ottoman legacy in the eyes of the Arab Islamist movement and its incorporation into the Islamist narrative took place over several decades. The gradual ascendancy to political rule of an indigenous Turkish strain of Islamism (as seen in the succession of the Welfare and Virtue Parties, followed by AKP), combined with the ideological assault on this movement by Kemalist and other political rivals who regarded it as a threat to secularism and to the republic as a whole, helped to instigate a new narrative about Turkey in Arab Islamist discourse. With the rise to power of AKP in 2002, modern Turkey no longer embodied the ever-present danger of a secular and successful counter-model to all that Islamism was and all that it strived to achieve. Instead, the emergence of AKP's Turkey was, from the Arab Islamist point of view, clearly and undeniably a demonstration of Islamism's inevitable and unstoppable rise to worldwide prominence and influence.

Another main reason for the rise of AKP's Turkey as a model for Arab Islamists was the lack of alternatives. The Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt and the Saudi monarchy had actively suppressed Islamist movements within their realms and maintained an unwavering strategic alliance with the United States. This alliance effectively excluded Egypt and Arabia as a referential home base for Islamism. Alternatives in the Arab world proved elusive. Sudan lacked the infrastructure for such a role, and its experimentation with Islamism (1989-1999) degenerated into chaos and autocracy. Algeria's Islamization was interrupted by the military voiding a putative Islamist electoral victory at the cost of plunging the country into civil war. Arab Islamists had to seek alternatives outside of the Arab world. Afghanistan may have been an attractive destination and incubator for militant radical Islamists, but its remoteness and its backward and harsh political culture made it unsuitable as a reference and as a model, especially for accommodationist Islamists. Sunni Arab Islamists' temptation to adopt the Islamic Republic of Iran as a patron and a model survived the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, which pitted Shiite and Persian Iran against the pseudo-nationalist regime of Saddam Hussein (and also helped to slow the demise of Arab nationalism and Sunni Islamism's subsequent ascendancy). It was, however, complicated by the emergence of Sunni-Shiite tensions across the region. The

benefits that a Sunni Arab movement derived from an alliance with Iran had to be urgent, necessary, and able to be satisfied nowhere else in order to counter-balance the negative effects of an alliance with a regional power increasingly perceived as a threat to both the Sunni and Arab identities. Only Hamas, in its declared need to combat Israel and its near isolation in the Arab context, could afford an open alliance with Iran. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, has been forced to engage in multiple balancing acts to explain its relationship with Iran, which has often seemed to be more of a liability than an asset.

While the “Turkish model” was for many Arab Islamists weak in its lack of Islamic assertiveness and thus unconvincing, it ultimately emerged as one of a few viable options for a concrete proposition in Islamist discourse. The “Neo-Ottoman” ambitions of AKP-ruled Turkey, which have been manifested in Turkey’s dramatically enhanced economic and political role in the Arab Middle East, offered many Islamists the promise of a Sunni alternative to Iran. The attractiveness of this promise was undeterred by the *de facto* preference of the Turkish government to seek alliances with and patronage of counterparts in Arab governments, even when these government partners or clients were hostile to Islamists within their own countries—such as Assad’s Syria and Qaddafi’s Libya. When assessed in Ankara’s own terms, Turkish actions have been entirely consistent with the aspirations of a rising and newly affluent regional superpower—and not the result of any new ideologically-motivated agenda. The sense of despair and malaise resulting from decades of autocratic repression and marginalization had led many accommodationist Islamists to value even symbolic gestures. Thus, the “open door” policy that Turkey, as both a government and civil society, had adopted towards the Muslim Brotherhood and other accommodationist Arab Islamist leaders—in the form of invitations to political and cultural events—kept the promise of Turkey’s emergence as a benefactor of Arab Islamism alive. For many Syrian Islamists, including the leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in exile, the solidifying relations between Ankara and Damascus were assessed positively as potentially providing the Syrian autocratic regime with the confidence and impetus to adopt some measure of political openness. In Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, accommodationist Islamists persisted in their hopes that AKP’s Turkey would emerge as a champion for their respective causes. The verbal rebuke of Israeli President Shimon Peres by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Davos in January 2009 and the death of nine Turkish activists in an Israeli commando raid on an unauthorized attempt by an aid flotilla to approach the Gaza Strip in May 2010 provided further proof of a concrete possibility of patronage from Ankara for Arab Islamists.

Irrespective of the intentions or convictions of AKP’s leadership, the promise of a Neo-Ottoman clientelism in Arab societies served as a vector for projecting Turkish soft power. The introduction of Arabic-language media to both television broadcast (with the Turkish government network, TRT, adding an Arabic channel to its line-up) and web-based

portals—both imbued with the deliberate ambiguity of suggesting affinity to Arab Islamism while maintaining plausible deniability—is clearly aimed at consolidating this soft power.

Hybridity in a Changing Landscape

WITH THE DEMISE OF THE MUBARAK REGIME IN EGYPT AND OF ZINE EL ABIDINE Ben Ali in Tunisia, the elements making the “Turkish model” attractive had already changed. Poised to benefit from the end of political repression in Egypt, the newly organized political party of the Muslim Brotherhood has continued to seek ties and potentially a deeper alliance with Turkish AKP. In a post-Mubarak Egypt, this alliance might develop on the basis of affinity and general interests. However, the Muslim Brotherhood no longer benefits from establishing relations with AKP the way it might have under autocratic rule. Instead, whether the Muslim Brotherhood emerges as the dominant force in the next parliamentary elections, slated for September 2011, or merely as an important minority bloc in parliament, the primary task that Arab Islamists expect of the Egyptian Brotherhood is the restoration of its status as a patron and as a model for other Islamist formations. Even with the severe restrictions imposed on it during the Mubarak regime, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood prided itself on having been the inspiration and intellectual weight behind the emergence of Islamist movements across the Muslim world, including Turkey. An emboldened Muslim Brotherhood might not have the structural power to serve as a patron for AKP, but the Brotherhood now is unlikely to engage Ankara as a client.

Over time, the affinity between the Egyptian Brotherhood and AKP may net a cordial but rather formal relationship. But the new Egyptian political scene will generate further diverging assessments of the AKP experience and the “Turkey model.” From the Salafi perspective, the “Turkey model” merely has an Islamic veneer; its actual content is derived from the Western political experience, and it is thus rejected as a false illusion and a bridgehead of liberal thought into the Islamist realm. At the other end of the Egyptian Islamist spectrum, accommodationist Islamists, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood who have organized as the New Center Party (*Hizb al-Wasat al-Jadid*, headed by Abu al-Ala Madi Abu al-Ala),¹⁵ have appropriated the “Turkish model” in a novel and substantive way, which may conform to the Salafi characterization of “bridgehead.” Presently, the direction to which this “bridgehead” will ultimately be pointed remains unresolved. The New Center Party may still opt to sharpen its Islamist message in the new and more open atmosphere of Egyptian politics; indications are emerging that this may indeed be the case, with a more explicit Islamist agenda being professed. However, the current platform of the New Center Party, including its futile attempt to satisfy the

debilitating demands of the Mubarak regime's political party supervisory body, adopts AKP-like ambiguity in its formulation of its position.

The New Center Party has thus emerged as a hybrid entity, unique in the Islamist universe, that displays civil forms and an underlying Islamist content. The internal cohesion of the hybrid proposition is almost irrelevant to its function. Hybridity may serve as a conduit, a virtual purgatory, for a presently largely undecided public to use as a future bridge to move from one ideological orientation to another. The direction of the flow will largely be dependent upon the ideological composition of the particular population and upon the character of the dominant mode of ideological discourse. Thus, in an environment saturated with Islamist assertions and exposed to an ascendant liberal discourse, hybridity could plausibly help to transit individuals invested in Islamism towards liberalism. Alternatively, in an environment with established liberal convictions subjected to a crisis in democracy and a re-assertive Islamism, hybridity could perform the opposite role, serving as a temporary container that would expunge liberal ideas and prepare individuals to embrace Islamism again. Hybridity may be a two-way street in all cases; it is however biased towards serving the dominant ideological proposition.

The situation of Egypt's January 25th revolution and its immediate aftermath is consistent with the first scenario. Islamism may have dominated the protest scene prior to the revolution, but it has been stunned and overtaken by events that are driven largely by secular, non-Islamist aspirations. Hybridity, in the short term, may work to deplete Islamism while siphoning away supporters and preparing them for liberal thinking. However, once the revolutionary euphoria is affected by the inevitable disappointments and once an Islamist plan of counter-action is put into place, the second scenario may materialize with hybridity operating to reclaim non-committed or disillusioned populations for Islamism. May we expect that the Islamist-to-civil democracy conduit will gather together a critical mass that is capable of competing with and fending off assorted Islamist efforts at reclaiming the initiative? Or does hybridity constitute instead an ultimately unnecessary and potentially counterproductive delay in the confirmation of secular and civil democratic values in a public that, even when religiously devout and conservative, has not previously displayed an attachment to Islamism? These important questions will eventually be answered by still unfolding events, which will ultimately reveal whose prognosis amongst the Islamist and secular critics of the New Center Party is correct. Of course, these questions and concerns parallel those raised in regard to AKP in Turkey. Is AKP a manifestation of a democratic process of inclusion that has incorporated a conservative and religious population into a polity that is fundamentally and irrevocably democratic and secular? Or is AKP a corrosive force that will either inadvertently or deliberately weaken the civil and secular foundations of modern Turkey and that will prepare the country for Islamism?

The Egyptian New Center Party presents itself as a civil and democratic movement

that embraces and operates within an Islamic frame of reference. The party thus claims absolute values to be reified and implemented as a function of relative conditions. Its understanding of the place of Islam in public and social life is based on a distinction made between Islamic absolutes, which are beyond the realm of questioning and inquiry, and social relatives, which are subject to human judgment. The centrist position, one that acknowledges the absolutes and engages in the exploration of the relatives, is mid-way between the rationalist dismantling of absolutes and the radical Islamist virtual elimination of the relatives. The party presents its platform and agenda in contradistinction to the Muslim Brotherhood's withdrawn and rejectionist tendencies, and even more to the Salafists, who engage in "absolutizing the relative." The party also defines itself in opposition to what it claims are "Western" political ideologies that reject the notion of absolute values altogether. As noted earlier, the New Center Party may be able to win recruits and mobilize voters regardless of its ideological cohesiveness (an arguably attainable standard for any party). Over the longer term, however, the party's ability to defend its agenda of absolute values and relative implementations against the massive Islamist output that has limited the space of relativity remains its Achilles heel. In an environment still saturated with Islamist discourse, the New Center Party may appear to be an attractive vehicle for liberal ideas. But to invoke one further Homeric metaphor, it is also fair to ask whether the party's Islamic frame of reference is an Islamist Trojan horse.

The position of the Nahdah party¹⁶ in Tunisia may be characterized as being midway between that of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and that of the New Center Party. Nahdah is more assertive with its Islamism than the New Center but even more accommodationist with respect to liberal principles than the Muslim Brotherhood, which has yet to revise its negative stance on the assumption of positions of leadership by women and non-Muslims. However, in Tunisia, just as it is in modern Turkey, the dominant and institutional form of political discourse is avowedly secularist. While the heavy-handed and often anti-religious practices of the Ben Ali regime had eroded some of the country's native attachments to secularism, the revolution of January 8th has reinvigorated secular, liberal voices and they have begun to reassert the indigenous character of their convictions. In response to this, Nahdah and other Islamists have proposed a distinction between "secularity" (*ilmaniyyah*) and "secularism" (*la'ikiyyah*, from the French *laïcité*), the former being native to Tunisia and inclusive and the latter being imposed from the outside or by a political authority and restrictive. The Nahdah's stated aim is thus to widen the political space and to bring into the political fold those Islamist and religious individuals who were previously excluded by the regime and who may seek radical formulations in response to their alienation. Nahdah is also an expression of hybridity. But will it ultimately serve Islamization or the advance of a more inclusive, representational, and secular (as opposed to secularist) political order? Both the role and controversy

surrounding the place and function of the Nahdah party in Tunisian society bear considerable resemblance to those affecting AKP in Turkey.

In the two Arab societies that have embarked upon regime change by toppling autocrats—Tunisia and Egypt—the “Turkish model” is currently being applied. The model in question, however, is not one of synthesis and development, but it is rather one of ambiguity and hybridity. The “Turkish model” is in fact being emulated by hybrid political groups positioned at a presumed intersection of civil democracy and Islamism. Unfortunately, previous experimentations with such hybrid formulations involving Islamism across the globe (Iran, Sudan, and Gaza) have suggested that stricter expressions of Islamism ultimately prevail. This may be less due to procedural and operational aspects of hybridity than to the homogenizing resilience of Islamism as an ideology. Will the proposed hybrid formulations succeed in creating lasting alternatives to conventional Islamism? While not readily promising, in the hard-won reality of free expression, ideologies ought to live and die in the marketplace of ideas. Egypt and Tunisia have therefore newly emerged as locales where the “Turkish model” is being emulated and tested and thus where the model will either be vindicated or rejected as long as the choice is really free.

NOTES

1. An illustrative portal for the Egyptian revolution, reflecting its multitude of voices and displaying its diverse slogans is <http://egypt-revolution.info/ar>.
2. Compare, for example, the consistent prior rejection by Abu Yahya al-Libi for any action undertaken outside of the leadership of radical Islamist jihad and his current endorsement of the Libyan revolution as expressing the will of the people. See http://www.archive.org/download/Libya_ABO_YAHYA/Message.To.The.People.of.Libya.WMV.
3. For an example of radical Islamist brainstorming on the lessons learned from the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, and a discussion of next steps to undertake, see *al-munis bi-fawaid wa-ibar in-tifadatay Misr wa-Tunis* (the companion to the lessons of the uprisings of Egypt and Tunis), serialized by Hamzah b. Muhammad al-Bassam and diffused in Islamist forums.
4. For an assessment on the official Muslim Brotherhood website of the Turkish reception of the Malaysian model, see <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=31241&SecID=341> [in Arabic].
5. For an overview of internal Islamist debates on the Turkish model, see <http://www.assafir.com/MulhakArticle.aspx?EditionId=1778&MulhakArticleId=83439&MulhakId=1340> [in Arabic].
6. An example is provided by the Iraqi newspaper al-Mada (<http://almadapaper.net/news.php?action=view&id=37773>) quoting Erdogan in his March 28th, 2011 address to the Iraqi parliament urging Iraqi unity: “Everyone is following your news, in Istanbul, Kabul, Darfur, Gaza, Ramallah, and Jericho; the more you are united, the more everyone is united.”

7. A compendium of the slogans of the Egyptian revolutions is provided and endorsed on the Muslim Brotherhood site at <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=79108&SecID=0>.
8. An example of an assessment of the “overlooked role” of Islamist activists is provided by a participant at <http://shababelikhwan.net/ib/index.php?showtopic=24368>. Their relative absence, in his opinion, is reflective of a Mubarak regime campaign of harassment and arrests, and of a subsequent anti-Islamist media effort.
9. <http://gatewaypundit.rightnetwork.com/2011/01/iranian-regime-takes-credit-for-protests-sweeping-arab-states/>.
10. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/01/liveblogging-egypt-day-2/70467/>.
11. “Democracy uprising in Egypt: Vindication for Bush ‘freedom agenda’?” February 1, 2011 <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2011/0201/Democracy-uprising-in-Egypt-Vindication-for-Bush-freedom-agenda>.
12. http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/03/turkey_and_its_region: “Recep Tayip Erdogan, thinks he can take credit for the wave of protests sweeping the Arab world. ‘Which country were they inspired by?’ he asked the Turkish parliament recently. He answered his own question: Turkey, with its ‘advanced democracy’.”
13. Nasir b. Hamad al-Fahd, *al-dawlah al-uthmaniyyah wa-mawqif aimmat al-dawah minha* (The Ottoman State and the position of the Wahhabi leaders towards it) <http://www.tawhed.ws/?i=zdnfte5u>.
14. See for example the al-Qaeda video release, Ayman al-Zawahiri’s “Message to the Turkish Muslim People” (August 2010) in which the Ottoman State is rehabilitated as a manifestation of the Caliphate.
15. <http://www.alwasatparty.com/index.html>.
16. <http://www.nahdha.info/arabe/index.php>.

The Islamic Republic's Cross-Sectarian Outreach

By Alex Vatanka

AT A TIME OF UNPRECEDENTED POPULAR UNREST IN KEY ARAB states of the Middle East, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated in a February 21, 2011 speech that two simple remedies are required to solve the problems that afflict the contemporary Islamic World. According to Khamenei, "unity among Muslim [states]" and "the weakening of America" are the two necessary steps that all Muslims must take to secure a "bright" future for the umma or the worldwide Muslim Nation.¹

These twin messages—unity of the Muslim Nation and struggle against the United States to repel its influence in Muslim lands—have formed the core of the Islamic Republic's outreach to Muslims globally. On its surface, this overall message is simple and straightforward, and Iranian officials have continuously repeated it ever since the 1979 revolution. But the very simplicity of this message is one reason why the Islamic Republic's public diplomacy has failed to gain much traction in the larger Muslim world. Among other things, by making the ideal of Islamic unity fundamentally inseparable from anti-Americanism and the struggle against the West, Iran's message has been a non-starter for a long list of Muslim countries that have vested interests in maintaining friendly relations with the United States. Far more significantly, despite years of promoting intra-Islamic unity, Tehran's international outreach has failed to make any significant progress in bridging the important theological and culturally-rooted differences that continue to divide Muslims along sectarian lines. Indeed, because of its inherently political nature, Iran's cross-sectarian outreach has actually exacerbated these differences.

The meager attendance at the pan-Islamist venue where Khamenei delivered his remarks on February 21st was a revealing sign of the general failure of Iran's outreach

to Sunni Muslims. He spoke at a gathering in Tehran of Shia and Sunni clergy who attended the 24th annual International Islamic Unity Conference. Not a single prominent Sunni cleric was present among the reported 200 delegates from 57 countries who attended the conference.

While the geopolitical realities and rivalries of the greater Middle East hugely complicate Iran's efforts to bridge the religious differences among the various branches of Islam, the Islamic Republic's pan-Islamist message faces equally steep hurdles at home. The case of Iran's own deeply aggrieved Sunni minority illustrates the effects of genuine sectarian differences and is itself a telling case study of how lack of progress toward intra-Islamic reconciliation is experienced within individual Muslim-majority states. These domestic shortcomings, however, have not stopped the Iranian regime from considering the present upheaval in the Arab world as an opportune moment to propagate more intensely the idea of Islamic unity and the kind of leadership and facilitation the Islamic Republic claims it can provide in a transformative period that Tehran has dubbed an "Islamic Awakening."²

An Outwardly Simple Message

ON FEBRUARY 11, 2011—A DATE THAT SOME IRANIANS CELEBRATE AS "REVOLUTION Day" to commemorate the 1979 fall of the Shah's regime—a mid-ranking Shia cleric went to the podium as the Friday prayer leader in the Kurdish city of Sanandaj and proclaimed that Iran's Sunnis "have no sanctuary other than in the arms of Ayatollah Khamenei."³ This pronouncement by the cleric, Hojjat-ol Eslam Seyyed Abol-Hassan Navab, was not a spontaneous act of admiration for Iran's supreme leader. Instead, it was a calculated declaration directed at the residents of a Kurdish and Sunni-majority town that is part of a larger campaign by the Islamic Republic to tackle rising sectarian tensions head-on. Indeed, the cleric Navab himself has made a career as an instrument of the regime's cross-sectarian outreach: presently the head of the University of Religions and Denominations, an institution dedicated to religious education, Navab is a former head of the International Affairs section of Iran's Islamic Propaganda Organization and used to focus on working in Arab countries.⁴

The Islamic Republic's ruling political elites—whether they are men of the cloth or uniformed commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps—have a deep-rooted fear that sectarian conflict will break out inside Iran's own borders. These worries have grown especially in recent times, as Sunni-Shia divisions have often been a key sustainer of conflict in a variety of places ranging from Yemen to Lebanon and Bahrain to Pakistan. To ward off creeping sectarianism, the Islamic Republic has in recent years redoubled its broad-based information campaign aimed at promoting its message

of Islamic unity and its purportedly anti-sectarian agenda to Sunni Muslims both at home and abroad.

A recent fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khamenei is commonly enlisted in Iran's Sunni outreach. On October 2, 2010, Khamenei in reply to a questioner ruled that "insulting the symbols of the Sunni brothers, including the Prophet Muhammad's wife [Aisha], is forbidden. This includes the women of all prophets and especially the holy Prophet Muhammad."⁵ The ruling was in reaction to the common Shiite practice of denouncing Sunni Islam's first three Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman) and their families, whom the Shiites do not consider the rightful heirs to the Prophet Muhammad. The fatwa was swiftly publicized by Iran's state-controlled and pro-regime media as ground-breaking. It was also praised as a ruling that generated much excitement and appreciation among Sunni scholars worldwide.⁶

The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought—which was established in the early 1990s on the order of Khamenei as the main agency to promote pan-Islamic reconciliation—was quick to publicize what it claimed to be widespread praise among Sunni Arabs for the supreme leader's fatwa. The forum, which is known in short as the "Taghrib," reported in particular that Shaykh Ahmad Al-Tayeb, the head of Cairo's al-Azhar University, welcomed the supreme leader's fatwa as "prudent" and "timely" and hailed it as a decision that "would help ram the door shut to *fitna* [division among Muslims]."⁷ To convey the impression that the fatwa's impact reached well beyond mainstream Sunni religious corners, the case was also made that even vehemently anti-Shia voices had been persuaded to see the light after the supreme leader's ruling. Omar Bakri Muhammad, the renowned Salafist cleric and someone otherwise linked to anti-Shia takfiri ideology, said on Al Jazeera television that his views on the Shia had been transformed because of Khamenei's ruling.⁸

As a matter of principle, though not always in practice, the ruling elite in Tehran has been committed to the cause of Islamic unity ever since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Indeed, Iranian officials routinely claim that the "unification of the ranks of Muslims against the enemies of Islam....has been one of the most important goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran."⁹ In recent years, however, the Islamic Republic's efforts to extend its message of Islamic solidarity have increased markedly.¹⁰ In 2008—a year that was officially declared as the "Year of Islamic Unity" in Iran—the organizers of the annual Islamic unity conference in Tehran published a charter and a set of guiding principles that outline the spirit of Islamic cooperation to which Tehran aspires. The document goes into specific detail about ways to avoid *fitna* and to bring an end to sectarian divisions in the Muslim Nation. For example, it urges Muslims from different sects to avoid "name-calling [*tafsiq*] and declaring each other as unbelievers [*takfir*]" and further adds that "ascribing innovation [*bidah*] to other Muslims must be avoided."¹¹

There are enormous divergences between the nine main principles of pan-Islamic unity proposed in the document and the actual religious realities within Iran today. For example, two of the stipulated guidelines in the document awkwardly put the record of the Iranian regime in the spotlight. First, one of the document's points says that "Government organizations must avoid imposing a particular madhhab [Muslim school of law] on their populace" and that governments should accord followers of "certified Islamic madhhabs....all rights of citizenship." Second, the document encourages religious scholars to "strive to foster moderation and tolerance through the implementation of any and all educational methods available."¹² On both of these principles, Tehran's record does not match its sloganeering and claims about Islamic unity.

The Case of Sunnis in Iran

IN A SERMON ON FEBRUARY 18, 2011, ONE OF IRAN'S MOST PROMINENT SUNNI clerics called upon government authorities in Tehran to actually implement their own rhetoric on religious equality and Muslim unity within the country itself. Maulana Abdulhamid Esmail-Zehi, who is the Friday prayer leader in Zahedan, the capital of the Sunni-majority Sistan and Baluchistan province, further stated that "Without religious equality the province cannot rid itself of Sunni discontent." If there is one Sunni population that Tehran's outreach must win over to ensure that religious sectarianism does not lead to politically disastrous consequences for the Islamic Republic itself it is Iran's own estimated seven million-strong Sunni minority located in Iranian Baluchistan, Kurdistan and elsewhere.

Since 2003, there has been an upsurge in anti-regime violence in Iranian-controlled Baluchistan in particular. The majority of this violence has been perpetrated by a Sunni terrorist group calling itself Jundollah, or the "Army of God." Despite the arrest and execution of the Jundollah's top leader Abdul Malek Rigi in 2010, the group has retained its ability to carry out deadly assaults against Iranian government targets, the last of which took place in December 2010, when some forty people were killed in twin suicide bombings. While banditry and armed clashes have been ongoing in Baluchistan dating back to the 1960s and even earlier, Iranian observers of ethnic Baluch affairs have warned that the contemporary nature of militancy in the restive province has been looking increasingly similar to the *modus operandi* of jihadist groups that operate in neighboring Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moreover, they claim that the sectarian religious justification behind the armed attacks in Iran is becoming ever-more pronounced.¹³

To counter sectarianism and neutralize Baluch militancy, the Iranian security

forces, including the IRGC's top brass, have for a number of years touted the importance of working closely with local tribal and Sunni religious leaders. However, the personal story of Zahedan's Sunni leader Maulana Abdulhamid makes it plainly clear that the challenges Tehran faces are not limited simply to Iranian Sunnis who opt for a violent path. Despite the fact that Maulana Abdulhamid has always condemned the attacks of Jundollah, two of his sons-in-law were arrested in October 2010 on suspicion of being in contact with foreign intelligence services, according to Iran's Fars News agency. The arrests were apparently linked to the Iranian government's efforts to force the senior Sunni cleric to emend his ways. Previously, Maulana Abdulhamid had complained about the enormous pressures he was under from Tehran because of his opposition to the central government's insistence on organizing and regulating curricula for Sunni religious students at about sixty seminaries located in Iranian-controlled Baluchistan.¹⁴ Accordingly, Abdulhamid urged the Shia-dominated ruling elite in Tehran to stop attempting to control Sunni religious affairs and to enact policies that accord with the principles of religious freedom and equality that the regime professes. "If the [Iranian] constitution is implemented [by the regime in Tehran] about the religious rights of the Sunnis," he said, "then a lot of the [Sunni] complaints and anxieties will be solved."¹⁵ In effect, what Maulana Abdulhamid requested was no different and nothing more than what the Iranian Taghrib claims it is committed to securing for all Muslims in Iran—namely, that "Government organizations must avoid imposing a particular madhhab [Muslim school of law] on their populace."

It might be argued that Sunni Baluch are experiencing increased state pressure and scrutiny because of the escalating levels of violence in the southeast of the country. But in fact, other Sunni populations located elsewhere in Iran have also been targeted by security forces. For example, in early March 2011, additional security forces were deployed to the towns of Mashhad and Taybad in the northeastern province of Khorasan Razavi after several local Sunni preachers were arrested and amid fears of a popular backlash against the regime.¹⁶ Maulana Mohammad Fazeli, Taybad's Sunni imam, had earlier been suspended from preaching, and his arrest represented a clear escalation by the regime. Local Sunni seminarians were reportedly also contemplating a boycott of any dealings with the authorities until other arrested Sunni clergy were released. Even the mainstream Shia Iranian society was captivated by events in Taybad, as news of the security services' deployment circulated through reporting and video clips on Persian-language websites.

The same official heavy-handedness and apprehension toward Sunni political activity is also evident in Iranian Kurdistan. In early March 2011, for example, there were reports of a number of arrests of ethnic Kurds in the towns of Saqqez and Baneh. The detainees were charged among other things for insulting Shia religious figures. Meanwhile,

Tehran on a number of occasions has claimed to have intercepted radical Sunni literature and arrested “Wahhabi terrorists” purported to have been involved in armed attacks in Iran’s northwestern region.¹⁷ In recent years, Iranian authorities have reportedly also periodically confiscated so-called “deviant Wahhabi” literature in southern regions of the country where Iran’s Sunni Arab population mainly resides.¹⁸

Iranian authorities have at no stage produced any specific examples of the alleged “Wahhabi literature”—a phrase meant to describe the radical and vehemently anti-Shia religious material that Tehran claims is funded by the oil-rich Sunni Arab states of the Persian Gulf. This incomplete picture has led to speculation among Sunni activists and Iran-watchers alike that the seizures are actually targeting Sunni religious material that is not necessarily *takfiri* or anti-Shia in nature. If this is correct, then it demonstrates the heightened level of anxiety found in the ranks of the Iranian regime about even mainstream Sunni religious activity. It also highlights the gap between rhetoric and practice in the Islamic Republic over the issue of *vahdat*, or Islamic unity.

Geopolitical Deliberations

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC’S RULING ELITES ARE FIXATED ON WAHHABISM FOR good reason. For all its sloganeering about *vahdat*, much of the drive behind Tehran’s pan-Islamic outreach is first and foremost political, and it is undertaken with a view toward enhancing Iran’s geopolitical position. This occurs in the context of the Iranian regime’s ambitions to become the leader of the Islamic World, a goal hindered by the Persian and Shia characteristics of the Islamic Republic.¹⁹

Further, in the Iranian understanding of the realities of the Middle East and the Islamic World, no state is a greater challenger in undermining Tehran’s goals and delegitimizing its Islamic credentials than Saudi Arabia. Countering the House of Saud and the influence of the religious Wahhabi establishment that gives legitimacy to the monarchy’s rule have therefore become top priorities for Iranian foreign policy, and an abundance of Iranian official statements are at hand to demonstrate this.

First, the official Iranian narrative as evident in the material published by state-controlled media does not hold back in denouncing almost everything linked to Wahhabism. For instance, the Wahhabis, a broad term that includes the Saudi government and the clergy in Saudi Arabia, are said to be in an alliance with the “West and the Zionists.”²⁰ Claims that Wahhabism is a foreign-made conspiracy against the Muslim Nation are not limited to fringe elements among the Iranian Shia clergy. Senior Shia figures regularly and strongly condemn all things Wahhabi and depict the sect as “contemptible” and deliberately “planted” in the midst of the umma by the West to create a rift among Muslims.²¹

For example, one of Iran's most senior Shia figures, Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, branded Wahhabis as "heartless extremists" who give "Islam and Muslims a bad reputation" through the violent operations of jihadist groups that are carried out in Iraq and elsewhere.²² At their core, such denunciations by Iranian clergy are in fact a reaction to the anti-Shia positions of the Wahhabi establishment, which has included the issuing of anti-Shia fatwas or insulting Shia clergy such as Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. But Iranian anti-Wahhabism also clearly reflects the rivalries between Tehran and Riyadh as they seek to advance their competing interests among various Muslim populations in the Middle East and beyond.²³

In fact, the gap between the Iranian Shia clerical hierarchy and that of the Wahhabi leadership is so great there are virtually no prominent examples of the two groups reaching out to each other since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979. If the Iranian authorities have all but given up on their ideals of Islamic unity when it comes to Wahhabis, it is clearly due to the diametrical positions that Tehran and Riyadh hold regarding most regional political competitions, such as their support for opposing parties (e.g., Hamas versus Fatah among the Palestinians or Hezbollah versus the "March 14" movement in Lebanon). But the gap between the Shiite hierarchy and the Wahhabi leadership is due to fundamental differences of a religious nature between Shiism and Wahhabi teachings. The reality of this deep-seated religious antagonism, however, is often underestimated in the standard narrative that explains the Iranian-Saudi or Iranian-Arab rivalry in merely political terms.²⁴

Today, the Wahhabi doctrine dominates the religious makeup of the Arabian Peninsula, and thus has effectively negated Tehran's pan-Islamic outreach to the Arab states to its south. As a consequence, Iranian officials have focused their efforts to present Wahhabism as an aberration to the rest of the Sunni world and to maintain that genuine reconciliation with Sunnis is both desired and possible.

Shia clergy have therefore begun to speak more forcefully against some of the cultural and other idiosyncrasies in Shiite practices that might be off-putting to Sunnis, in the hope of streamlining the sect's image and improving it in their eyes. This is in marked contrast to Tehran's anti-Wahhabi message, which accentuates the differences between Wahhabism and the Iranian conception of mainstream Islam. For example, Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Taskhiri, the head of the Taghrib, has repeatedly urged the Shia faithful to refrain from "acts and superstitious beliefs" that damage other Muslims' perceptions of the Shia and asked the Shiite ulema to stand at the forefront of this campaign. Such calls are not isolated or limited to the established clergy, but in fact reflect a larger trend in Shiite ritual practice that has grown particularly well among segments of the religiously-minded Iranian Shia youth.²⁵

There can be little doubt that these Iranian efforts to present Shiism in a favorable light to Sunnis are spurred on by the important linkages and alliances that Tehran

has formed with Islamist movements that are rooted in Sunnism such as Palestinian Hamas, elements of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and Turkey's ruling AKP. Since the beginning of 2011, Tehran's outreach has also been driven by the popular unrest that has swept through the Arab world on an unprecedented scale. Tehran views this unrest as an opportunity to work through its Sunni allies to further extend its influence among Sunni Arabs.

Hamas and AKP

COMPARING TEHRAN'S RELATIONS WITH HAMAS, TURKISH AKP, AND THE MUSLIM Brotherhood of Egypt (see following section) provides a useful way of assessing Iran's past cross-sectarian outreach to Sunni Islamists and its current momentum, as well as Tehran's grand ambitions for the future. Of all the Sunni Islamist groups with which Iran has connections, Tehran's relationships with Hamas and the much smaller Palestinian Islamic Jihad are the friendliest. In its Sunni-world outreach, Tehran likes to point to its support and close ties to these groups, which began in earnest in the early 1990s, as proof of its cross-sectarian religious credentials. However, these relations are overwhelmingly political in nature and expedient given the international isolation that the Islamic Republic and the radical Palestinian groups face. The relationship is largely driven by Iran's geopolitical aims and the need for these Palestinian groups to find a resourceful patron and financial benefactor. While both sides of the relationship share a common anti-Israel and anti-United States stance, there is no sign that Iran has made any notable efforts through such partnerships to bridge Sunni-Shia theological differences.

A different set of enticements and pragmatic considerations have helped bring about the warmer relations between Iran and Turkey's ruling AKP, even though Tehran avidly publicizes the role of Islam as the connecting factor.²⁶ Most likely, the key driver behind closer ties since AKP came to power in 2002 has been growing bilateral trade and other mutual economic benefits. Between 2000 and 2010, Tehran-Ankara trade increased ten-fold to \$10 billion per year, and the stated aim is to grow this volume to \$30 billion per year.²⁷ Furthermore, as Turkey's decades-long overtures to the European Union are seen in Ankara as unanswered, AKP flaunts its approach to relations with Iran and other states in the Middle East as serving the country's interests and turning Turkey into the principal power in its regional domain.

For the Iranian regime, improving economic and political ties with Turkey are touted primarily as evidence that Tehran cannot be isolated by international sanctions imposed on its nuclear activities.²⁸ Still, while the wide-ranging utility of close ties with the nation-state of Turkey is clearly incomparable to the kind of limited means that the

Hamas group can bring to the table, both sets of relations should nonetheless be recognized as being driven by primarily practical considerations and not sustained by adherence to any pan-Islamist dogma.

So far, any advance toward the ideal of Sunni-Shia unity has been, at best, rhetorical. One such example came in December 2010, when Recep Erdogan became the first Turkish prime minister to attend an Ashura ceremony in Istanbul. His address at the ceremony implored “Sunnis and Shia to put aside their differences and unite.”²⁹ Erdogan’s message was likely aimed primarily at mollifying Shia (Alevi) and Sunni tensions that exist within the Turkish population. But the fact that Erdogan shared the podium with Ali Akbar Velayati, a former long-time Iranian foreign minister and top advisor to Ayatollah Khamenei, suggests that a wider regional audience was also in mind.

Despite this and other symbolic gestures, and given mounting concerns among Western observers that enhanced AKP-Iran collaboration represents the emergence of an inherently anti-Western front, there are already lucid examples of growing Iranian anxieties about Ankara stealing Tehran’s thunder by becoming the *de facto* flag bearer of modern Islamism and pan-Islamic unity in the Middle East. A recent example that demonstrated the inherent but so far subtle competition unfolding between Tehran and Ankara for leadership in the region centered on the Iranian reaction to the outpouring of popular Arab support for the Turks following the May 31, 2010 Israeli raid on the Gaza-bound “Freedom Flotilla.” First, the Iranian officials welcomed the operation, and they applauded the Turkish government’s stance in the standoff with Israel that followed. However, from the early days in the affair it was apparent that the Iranian regime felt a degree of discomfort with the excitement the Turkish action had created among Arab populations. Iranian state-controlled media was quick to point out that Turkey was in fact “following in the footsteps of the Islamic Republic” in adopting its tough stance toward Israel—a statement that tells of Tehran’s fears about becoming a secondary anti-Israel actor in the region. Should this occur, Iranian inroads made among Arab populations in recent years would likely be eroded.

Indeed, as Tehran strives to create a viable region-wide Islamic front in which it can play a leading role, AKP’s Turkey may become its greatest stumbling block. In the context of trans-national Islamist collaboration and ideology, AKP thus far reflects many of the aspirations of the “mainstream,” modernizing, religiously conservative, non-Wahhabi Sunni world that Tehran also seeks to connect. As such, AKP’s rise and the growing appeal of its model combining Islamism and nationalism present a new kind of competition for the Islamic Republic’s outreach.³⁰

At the same time, AKP leadership’s improving relations with Iran have given Tehran’s cross-sectarian agenda a much needed boost and new legitimacy among Sunnis. Seeking to build on this new momentum, Iran has looked at the Arab

revolutions of the Winter of 2011 as a golden opportunity. Despite the abundant evidence showing that the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world have largely been a reaction to socio-economic stagnation and political repression, Iran's leaders have sought to portray them as part of a regional "Islamic Awakening." In a prompt and sustained rhetorical blast, Tehran sought to lay claim to the Arab uprisings by casting them as modeled on the 1979 Iranian revolution and as fundamentally anti-Western, insofar as the Arab regimes that were toppled had benefited from the patronage of states in the West.

As the spill-over effect of Arab unrest has gripped new countries from Egypt to Yemen to Bahrain, Tehran has intensified its efforts to "Islamicize" the popular revolts. For example, Ali Larijani, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, stated that people in the region had woken up to the call of Islam and that "Iran would help any uprising in the region that was anti-Israeli and anti-American." These sentiments were subsequently echoed repeatedly by other senior Iranian figures.

Iran and Arab Revolutions

IN PROPAGATING ITS MESSAGE OF ISLAMIC UNITY AND ANTI-WESTERN STRUGGLE, Iran has consistently sought to avoid issuing any statements that might be interpreted as sectarian or construed as favoring the Shia in the Middle East as this could be counterproductive to its larger agenda. However, this policy position has been severely tested since mid-March 2011 when the ruling Sunni Khalifa government of Bahrain, backed by the Saudi Arabian military, began a crackdown against mainly Shia protesters. Iranian discourse began to openly express sympathies along sectarian lines but without taking on a stridently anti-Sunni tone. However, Iran's anti-Saudi and anti-Wahhabi message has remained as strong as ever, and Tehran has accused Riyadh of pursuing a bloody crackdown against the Bahraini Shia. Meanwhile, a top Iranian priority in this information operation has been to assert that the Saudi military's deployment to Bahrain only began after Washington's consent had been secured. This has been meant to underscore Iran's larger claims that a Saudi-American axis operates throughout the region to defend the interests of extra-regional powers and at the expense of repressed local Muslim populations (*mustadafin*).³¹

From the moment the Tunisian Revolution toppled President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, rejuvenated Iranian public relations efforts were set in motion aimed at reaching out to the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly in Egypt. Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, arguably the most influential Muslim Brother, was the focus and hailed as a praiseworthy revolutionary while the likes of Mohammad El Baradei and Omar Suleiman were repudiated as Western lackeys.

Despite its initial enthusiasm for Qaradawi during the Egyptian Revolution, Tehran was soon taken aback by the Egyptian cleric's position on the Bahraini protests. After Qaradawi purportedly urged a crackdown on the mainly Shia protesters in Bahrain, he was mildly denounced by Iranian officials for holding "discriminatory" viewpoints.³² The episode again highlighted that in its quest for maximum political gain from the unrest in the Arab world, Iranian officials have conveniently or perhaps out of heightened euphoria misjudged the strength of anti-Shia sentiments that exist even among personalities that Iran has touted as part of mainstream Sunnism.

In hoping, and perhaps even believing, that the Muslim Brotherhood might end up coming to power in Cairo after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, Tehran evidently did not want to be slow in choosing a side and looked to the basic slogan of Islamic solidarity as its main vehicle for pushing its agenda in Cairo. Naturally, this pan-Islamist rhetoric was from the outset self-serving and aimed at enhancing Tehran's geopolitical reach through association with the Arab world's most significant country—and one that Iran had not had relations with since 1980. At the same time, it was notable that the Muslim Brothers have largely sought to disassociate themselves publicly from Tehran's call for establishing an Islamic state in Egypt.

Iran's brisk support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its careful efforts to minimize any sectarian tensions, reflects the view from Tehran that the Middle East is genuinely at a historic crossroads and that Iran can become a major beneficiary of a likely regional power transformation so long as it remains watchful of its adversaries rendering it as a Persian or Shia power. Accordingly, pan-Islamic unity was emphasized, sectarian differences were downplayed, and Tehran pushed ahead with a basic strategy of linking Arab regimes under pressure at home to Washington and presenting American policies as essentially "anti-Islamic." This basic anti-American message aimed at the wider Islamic world has been propagated by the Islamic Republic since 1979. Thus far, it has had limited traction with the majority of the governments in the Arab countries. This is largely because Washington remains a critical strategic partner for most states in the Middle East, but Tehran's understanding is that its formula for regional renewal is a duality and that its weak cross-sectarian and pan-Islamist record and credentials would require that all-binding factor of anti-Americanism for the Iranian policy to move forward, at least amongst those Arab states experiencing turbulence and where power outcomes are still to be decided.

A State or a Cause?

THE LEADERS OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC BELIEVE PAN-ISLAMIC AND CROSS-SECTARIAN outreach is an important vehicle for the extension of Iranian power in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Islamic World. However, there is a glaring disparity between Iranian rhetoric on Islamic unity and its actions. Indeed, Tehran's cross-sectarian record might be viewed in a considerably better light by the Sunni mainstream if the Iranian authorities would actually apply their own declared principles of religious freedom and equality at home and if the Iranian government could address the existing demands of local Sunni ulema with a more equitable policy.

While it is true that the social unrest and grievances of the Sunni majorities in Iranian Baluchistan and Kurdistan are, for the most part, rooted in poor socio-economic conditions, the undeniable reality is that the debate about how to solve these problems increasingly requires tackling discriminatory policies pursued by Tehran that many Sunnis complain favor the country's Shia majority. In short, Tehran's cross-sectarian hype remains unmatched by its deeds, and this is despite the regime's clear awareness of the significance of this issue for societal stability in Iran and despite also the steps that authorities have taken—such as Ayatollah Khamenei's 2010 fatwa against insults at Sunni sanctities. In this way, among others, the Iranian domestic reality is increasingly a liability for Tehran's efforts to reach out to non-Iranian Sunnis and extend its influence and power internationally.

The general failure of Iran's efforts at intra-Islamic reconciliation has helped draw increasing awareness in the region to the actual political drivers behind the Islamic Republic's cross-sectarian outreach. While Iranian officials routinely make statements portraying Tehran as the defender of the Muslim Nation and the "Islamic cause," critics in the Islamic world now habitually dismiss such overtures as diversions designed to conceal Tehran's ultimate objectives of opportunistically expanding its power and advancing its interests. For example, while Tehran has vocally and operationally supported the Palestinian struggle by supporting Hamas and Hezbollah, its silence in the face of Russian or Chinese crackdowns against their respective Muslim populations in the North Caucasus or in Xinjiang makes clear that Tehran only acts in the name of Islam when it serves a pragmatic or geo-political ambition. When there is no such overlap, or when the priorities of the state surpass in importance the much-touted principles of pan-Islamic solidarity, Tehran opts for silence.

As Iran strives to acquire influence and shape the outcomes of the contemporary revolutionary unrest in the Arab world, it will not be the Tehran regime's ideological appeal or its cross-sectarian credentials that will draw new clients to Iranian patronage.

Rather, it will be Iran's ability to serve as the material benefactor, much as it does now for Hezbollah or Hamas, for emerging political groups that are in need of an anchor at a time of great regional flux. In this context, the ongoing consequences of the Arab uprisings that might push existing or emerging political groupings into the arms of the Islamic Republic are far more important to the future of the region than Tehran's hitherto dynamic, but now widely ill-regarded, pan-Islamist ideals.

NOTES

1. See excerpts from Ayatollah Khamenei's speech, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8912020581>. The reference to the "need to weaken America" was subsequently removed from the original article first published by Fars News in Persian. For the Persian version, see "The popular and Islamic movement of the Egyptian people has to be strengthened," Fars News, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8912010806>.
2. See "Ahmadinejad underscores awakening of world nations," Fars News, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8912020572>; and Fars News, "Speaker: West fearful of Islamic awakening," <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8909110838>.
3. See "Sunnis have no sanctuary other than in the arms of Ayatollah Khamenei," Fars News, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8911220454>.
4. For more information about the activities of the institution, see the official website, <http://www.urdu.ac.ir/>
5. Iran's state-controlled media reported that Khamenei's fatwa had been issued after Yasser Al-Habib, a young outspoken Kuwaiti Shia cleric, had insulted Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad who is venerated in Sunni traditions but often disparaged by the Shia for her role in the Islamic succession process following the death of the Prophet.
6. As one example, see "Sunni world welcomes Leader's fatwa," Tehran Times, http://www.tehran-times.com/index_View.asp?code=227879.
7. See also "Sunni world welcomes Leader's fatwa," Tabnak, <http://www.tabnak.ir/en/news/1450>.
8. See "Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa changes Sunni extremist," Taghrib News, <http://www.taghribnews.com/vdciq3ap.t1ary2lict.html>. Omar Bakri Muhammad was quoted as stating that he had before "called the Shia Rafida [a derogatory term for Shias, meaning 'defector'] and thought that they excommunicated the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), but since I heard the fatwa by Ayatollah Khamenei, I have changed my stance regarding Shia and [Lebanese] Hezbollah."
9. See *Al-Taqrīb: A Quarterly Journal of Islamic Unity*, vol. 2, no. 3, Winter 2008.
10. For more background see Alex Vatanka, "Iran's Shia Reach Out to Mainstream Salafists," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 1, no. 7 (June 2008). In December 2006, Iran's then foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki stated, "the Islamic Republic of Iran has always called for unity among Muslims." Mottaki's pledge was political and made on the back of accusations by Sunni states that the summer 2006 war between Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel was an Iranian and Shia design to make inroads into the Arab Sunni world.

- The 2006 war effectively hastened the deterioration in relations between Shias and Sunnis, the age-old rift that had been violently rejuvenated following the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003.
11. See *Al-Taqrīb*.
 12. See “The Charter of Islamic Unity,” in *Al-Taqrīb: A Quarterly Journal of Islamic Unity*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Winter 2008): pp. 6-10.
 13. See Alex Vatanka, “Baluchistan gives Iran policy headache,” *Jane’s Islamic Affairs Analyst* (February 2011).
 14. See Amineh Soghdi, “Crackdown on Sunni Clerics in Iran’s Southeast,” Mianeh, December 3, 2010, <http://mianeh.net/article/crackdown-sunni-clerics-iran%E2%80%99s-southeast>.
 15. See also “In order to create unity you need more than words and hadith,” Sunni-News, http://www.sunni-news.net/fa/articles.aspx?selected_article_no=13953.
 16. See “A state of emergency in Taybad,” Sunni-News, http://www.sunni-news.net/fa/articles.aspx?selected_article_no=14085.
 17. See “The arrest of a number of members of the School of Quran [Maktab-e Quran] in Kordestan,” Sunni-News, http://www.sunni-news.net/fa/articles.aspx?selected_article_no=14202. The following are two typical examples of Iranian state media reporting on Sunni activities in Iran: “Iranian intelligence officers arrest Wahhabi-minded extremists,” *Tehran Times*, http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=215032; and “‘Terrorist leader killed in western Iran’,” *Press TV*, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/151899.html>. See also “The continuation of the seizure of passports of Sunni clergy,” *Deutsche Welle*, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,6246119,00.html>. One of the most deadly attacks in the northeast happened in September 2010. See “Bomb attack at Iranian parade kills at least 11,” *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/22/AR2010092200925.html>.
 18. Due to the lack of census data, there are no exact figures about the size of Iran’s Arab minority population. Most ethnic Arabs in Iran live in the province of Khuzestan but they are overwhelmingly Shia. Ethnic Arabs who are also Sunni tend to be concentrated in the coastal provinces of Bushehr and Hormozgan. For a background on the extent of Shia Arab disgruntlement in Khuzestan, see Alex Vatanka, “Minority report: Prospects for security in oil-rich Khuzestan,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, December 2007.
 19. For example see “Wahhabism is seeking to create rift between Shia and Sunnis,” *Fars News*, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8911280847>.
 20. For an example of such a narrative, see “The biggest enemy of Shias and Sunnis,” *Taybad Shia*, <http://www.taybadshia.com/pages.php?id=51>.
 21. In this kind of Iranian representation of the historical roots of Wahhabism, the British Empire is often accused of having deliberately cultivated Mohammad Abdul Wahhab and his movement in order to create a rift in the ranks of the Muslims. For an example, see “Not every Sunni is a Wahhabi; and no Wahhabi is a Sunni,” *Nazir*, http://www.nazir.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=524&Itemid=41.
 22. See “Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi: Wahhabis are less merciful than unbelievers [non-Muslims],” *Hawzah*, <http://www.hawzah.net/Hawzah/News/NewsView.aspx?NewsID=84992&LanguageID=1&NewsType=1>.
 23. For an example, see Donna Abu Nasr, “Saudi Clerics Criticize Shiites for Destabilizing,” *Associated Press*, June 1, 2008.
 24. For an extensive assessment, see “Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy,” *Rand*, 2009.
 25. For examples of such religious services see videos http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZ950_606B4 and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xb81ih2-U6w&feature=related>. In such chanting, the focus

- of adoration is on Imam Ali, Imam Hossein and Zaynab (the daughter of Imam Ali). In the view of hard-line Sunnis and increasing numbers of Shia, such practices fall outside the norms and teachings of Islam. In the Islamic Republic, however, these practices are still tolerated, probably because it draws some of the youth that otherwise might be attracted to activities that remove them entirely from a religious frame.
26. See “Leader: distance from the Zionist regime has brought Turkey closer to the Islamic nation,” Hamshahrionline, <http://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news-128373.aspx>.
 27. See “Iran, Turkey seek \$30bn trade ties,” PressTV, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/165166.html>.
 28. “Ahmadinejad defiant ahead of UN nuclear sanctions vote,” BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10262088>.
 29. See “Turkish PM says ‘Karbala source of Shia-Sunni unity,’” Taghrib, http://www.taghrib.ir/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=314:turkish-pm-says-karbala-source-of-shia-sunni-unity&catid=38:2009-08-31-05-02-22&Itemid=66.
 30. Following the fall of the Tunisian government and his return to Tunisia, Rashid Ghannouchi, the top Islamist figure in that country was asked, “Which Islamic country would you like Tunisia to resemble: Turkey, Iran, or Indonesia?” He replied: “Turkey, of course, but also Indonesia, Malaysia: Islamic countries with democratic systems.” See Ghannouchi’s interview with the Italian newspaper La Stampa on February 11, 2011 by BBC Monitoring.
 31. Kayhan, the hard-line Iranian paper that is the mouth-piece of the office of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei gave extensive coverage of events in Bahrain and has maintained a consistent anti-Saudi line throughout the Bahraini crisis. At one point, one of the paper’s headlines read “Iran will not tolerate the massacre of the Bahraini Shia.” See Kayhan, <http://kayhannews.ir/891225/index.htm>.
 31. See http://www.tehrantimes.com/Index_view.asp?code=237802.

AKP's New Turkey

By Ehud Toledano

THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY HAS UNDERGONE A PROFOUND ECONOMIC, social, and political transformation in the last decade, and the world has not failed to take note.¹ Much of this change has been spearheaded in the political realm by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), a market-oriented party with ideological roots in the Turkish Islamist movement and a strong political following in Turkey's religiously conservative and newly affluent middle class. In power since 2002, the AKP government has pursued sweeping domestic reforms, but outsiders have paid most attention to AKP's new and assertive foreign agenda, which has led to an unprecedented warming of relations between Ankara and its majority-Muslim neighbors, especially Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as to a chilling of modern Turkey's traditional alliances with Europe, Israel, and the United States. Many analysts in the West worry that Turkey's new policies are ideologically motivated by political Islam or by a so-called "Neo-Ottoman" revival of once dormant imperial ambitions. By contrast, to some observers in the Middle East—including many Islamists in the region—AKP's New Turkey represents a rising Islamic power and a model to all Muslim societies who strive for political and economic success.

Whether emulated or suspected of harboring hidden agendas, New Turkey's rapid emergence has not primarily been due to Islamist ideology or, for that matter, to policies associated with the Islamic faith. Rather, Turkey's rise as a power on the regional and even global scene is the consequence of the country's blistering economic growth over the last fifteen years.² In terms of GDP, the Turkish economy currently ranks sixteenth in the world, and its annual growth rate, which hovers at 11.4 percent, is second only to China and India.³

To be sure, Turkey is still very much a developing country: the country's per capita GDP is still relatively low by OECD standards, considerably lower than European Union rates, and about a third that of Israel, the leading industrial nation in the Middle East. Nevertheless, improvements in the standard of living experienced by vast segments of the population are visible to anyone visiting Turkey today, and the newly acquired wealth is more evenly distributed among the Turkish population than it is in many developing and even developed countries. For people in the region, this only enhances the legitimacy and appeal of the AKP model.

New Turkey's economic growth has been driven largely by an accelerated process of urbanization. Today, approximately 75 percent of the country's population lives in urban centers while the remainder resides in villages and small towns; only fifteen years ago, this urban-rural ratio was nearly the reverse. As this population has migrated to Turkey's cities, it has changed not only its location but also its character: the drive toward urbanization has significantly raised the general population's access to modern education, heightened its levels of participation in the national and global economies, and—not least significant—enhanced its political participation. While these former villagers have shed their rural way of life, their traditional culture and sensibilities have undeniably expressed themselves in the country's political landscape.

This complex transformation of Turkish society—which is still unfolding and very much incomplete—is the main reason why the Justice and Development Party came to power in November 2002 with 34 percent of the vote and returned the party to a second term in 2007 with a landslide 47 percent popular victory. At the same time, political Islam, once actively suppressed by secular Kemalist elites, has thus been granted a new life in Turkish democracy, thanks to AKP's rise. Yet, it is also easy to exaggerate the influence of Islamic currents within the party.

Today, AKP consists of a number of groups, some of them remnants of previously banned or defunct Islamist parties, with the religious-Islamic factions being one of the larger components but not the predominant one. Hardcore former members of the old Islamist parties (for example, the Milli Nizam Partisi, its successors Milli Selamet Partisi and the Refah Party, as well as the Fazilet Party) did not and still do not constitute a majority within AKP. In some ways in fact, AKP was the product of a split within the old Islamic movement: after the Fazilet Party was declared illegal, the more ideologically-inclined members of the movement followed former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, who was ousted in 1997, to form the Saadet Partisi, while the more moderate conservatives created AKP, which is in essence a center-right coalition. While ideological Islamists have found a home in AKP's broad tent, they are, in fact, outnumbered by conservative, business-oriented groups and also outranked by party leaders like Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul, who might, based on their record so far, best be described as Islamists-turned-modern politicians or as ideologues-turned-pragmatists.

When AKP first appeared on the political scene, there were rumors the group harbored secretive Islamist sympathies, but few of Turkey's elites saw the party as a threat to the Kemalist foundations of the Turkish republic. Instead, AKP was seen as a popular reformist party that promised to break the stranglehold of ageing Kemalist leaders over the country's economic and political life, to clear out much of the corruption in state institutions, and to promote the nation-wide expansion of democracy by strengthening rights and freedoms of expression and limiting the military's power over civil affairs.

In advancing this agenda, AKP Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has played a particularly crucial role. Thanks to his personal talents, as well as to the collapse of the old, internally divided and corrupt Kemalist parties, Erdogan managed early on to win the support of Turkey's western-oriented and liberal elites. Without the backing of this key constituency, AKP might never have had the money or support to succeed in breaking through the glass ceiling that has historically capped parties with a strong Islamic base with roughly a quarter of the electorate.

In AKP's first term in office, Erdogan and his party lived up to many of these liberal expectations. Suspicions that AKP harbored a "hidden agenda" resurfaced in the lead-up to the 2007 elections, but a number of factors—the party's indisputable record of economic growth, its relatively clean governance, the country's overall apparent stability, and also the absence of a credible political opposition—all led significant portions of Turkey's liberal and pro-Western voters to place their trust in AKP once again. Since AKP's competitors on both the right and the left did not fare as well electorally—and since the Turkish electoral system bars parties that do not achieve at least ten percent of the vote from parliamentary representation—AKP stunningly managed to gain a two-thirds majority in the Turkish legislature. The party subsequently used this large majority to elect one of its top leaders, Abdullah Gul—a former prime minister and foreign minister with a long personal background in Islamic politics—as President of the Republic (*Cumhurbaşkanı*).

The AKP government thus began its second term in power with no need for coalition partners in parliament and while holding the offices and policy portfolios of the prime minister, the president, defense minister, and foreign minister. With such a commanding hold on power, AKP since 2007 has sought to resolve many long-standing sociopolitical conflicts and external disputes that have troubled the Turkish republic ever since its founding over eighty years ago. Domestically, AKP has pursued a much more ambitious policy agenda that has included emending the Constitution and restructuring existing relations between civilian authority and the military and between religion and politics. Externally, AKP's foreign policy leaders have acted out of a deep-rooted desire to utilize the New Turkey's rising economic and strategic power to actively re-shape the regional order of things. In response to AKP's bold political moves, the public's views of the party have changed dramatically since 2007, and the party now faces a new and reinvigorated

opposition and risks losing the support of key constituencies in the lead-up to the upcoming 2011 elections.

Rolling Back the Deep State

IN THE WAKE OF THE 2007 ELECTORAL VICTORY, AKP WAS REASSURED IN ITS MISSION, and the party began its second term in power with a more ambitious and daring agenda for the New Turkey. This has entailed, among other things, a restructuring of the relationship between elected civilian authority and the nation's military, which has traditionally served as the protector of the secular Kemalist order. In this latter capacity, Turkey's military has played an active role in modern Turkish politics, and it has intervened on a number of occasions to overturn governments that have contravened Kemalist principles. The military has taken over the government directly in 1960, 1971, and 1980, and more recently, indirectly in 1997 in the so-called "Postmodern Coup." In the latter case, army generals managed to topple the government of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Islamic party MSP, through behind-the-scenes manipulation, without dissolving parliament and with no use of force to assume direct rule.

Since AKP's rise to power, the overall weakening of the military's position in Turkish political life has been obvious. At the outset of its rule, AKP was still politically constrained, but the party gained a useful boost in its drive to weaken the military's hold over politics both from its ability to maintain political stability over time and from the European Union, which, in the course of Turkey's negotiations with Brussels over accession to the E.U., sought to pressure Ankara to limit the army's abilities to stage *coups d'état*. This push has been accelerated by developments following AKP's 2007 victory.

The military's most recent attempt to intervene in national politics took place on April 4, 2007, when the General Staff (YAS, Yuksek Askeri Shura) sent an announcement to the press, which was then later posted on their website (it was dubbed the "E-Memo Warning" or "E-Muhtira"). The message stressed Turkey's commitment to secular Kemalist values and warned the AKP-dominated parliament against electing AKP's Abdullah Gul as President of the Republic. (Then YAS Chief-of-Staff General Buyukanit accepted responsibility for issuing the warning two years later in a television interview.) The army's resistance to Gul's candidacy prompted AKP to dissolve parliament and declare early elections. AKP won in a political landslide, and Gul was duly and promptly elected president.

The general political calm following AKP's electoral successes, and the stable and practically effective governments that it has managed to form, has helped sway opinion in Europe, the U.S.—and more importantly, in large portions of the Turkish public itself—to increasingly perceive the military's intervention in national political life as

illegitimate. This sentiment has been further reinforced by the exposure more recently of two failed coup attempts known as the *Balyoz* and *Ergenekon* affairs, which led to severe indictments of senior military officers by the attorney general and are currently under review in Turkish high courts. Dozens of senior army officers have been detained to face charges in both of these cases, and this has sent unmistakably loud signals to the army and its commanders that their past role in Turkish politics is no longer legitimate or acceptable under contemporary rule.

It is impossible to fully appreciate the historical nature of this contraction of the Turkish military's political influence without reference to the broader context of Turkish political culture. Indeed, ever since the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) coup against the Ottoman Sultan in 1908, myths surrounding the Young Turks and their fabled revolution have been part and parcel of the complex state-army-politics of modern Turkey.⁴ In contemporary Turkey, for example, there is a widely held popular belief in the existence of a sub-state structure known as the "Deep State" (*Derin Devlet*).⁵ This sub-state includes senior officers of the army and security services, the top echelon of the state bureaucracy, and leading members of the judiciary (mainly those on the Constitutional Court). The Deep State operates under a code of absolute loyalty to Kemalist principles and the republic as enshrined in a Secret Constitution (*Gizli Anayasa*). This tightly-networked shadow government allegedly re-emerges at times when the Kemalist state is faced with a crisis, at which point the Deep State overturns popularly elected-state institutions and rolls back political forces judged to have deviated from sacred Kemalist principles.

Turkish political culture is steeped in conspiracy theory, and for Turks of all social backgrounds and political persuasions much of this theorizing revolves around the idea of the Deep State. And as AKP's power has increased, some commentators have begun to speculate that it too would be overturned by the Deep State. It is often too easy to discount this kind of speculation, which is seldom backed up with any substantial evidence and frequently driven by political agendas. Nonetheless, this does not automatically mean that the government's conspiracy charges against the generals should not be properly and fairly investigated. Be this as it may, the Erdogan government has adroitly exploited the high-profile arrests and mounting public opinion against the army's involvement in politics following the *Balyoz* and *Ergenekon* affairs to launch a wider offensive against the military and other Kemalist institutions. In the last year alone, the AKP government has detained more people, including journalists, on dubious charges of conspiracy, and it has adopted a strikingly more interventionist approach to internal army affairs than has any prior government.

The latest round in AKP's power struggle with the General Staff took place in the first week of August 2010. Their disagreement revolved around the promotion of three generals, two of whom were allegedly involved in the *Ergenekon* coup attempt, while the

third was vetoed by President Gul because he had publicly insulted his wife. The symbolic insult took place several years ago, on September 19, 2007, when President Gul and his wife—her head covered with the traditional Islamic scarf—were on an official visit to an army base. As they welcomed the visiting leaders of the state, Deputy Chief of Staff General Aslan Guner noticed that the First Lady was wearing a headscarf and stepped out of the line to avoid shaking her hand. By so doing, he flagrantly signaled his unwillingness to grant official, Kemalist legitimacy to the public display of the veil, which Turks see as the ultimate religious symbol. Subsequently, in August 2010 the government rejected Guner's promotion to Ground Forces Commander; it also halted the promotion of the *Ergenekon* generals. This triggered a protest from the YAS. Yet after a protracted and well-publicized standoff between top generals and government officials, which included both the president and the prime minister, the army finally relented. The General Staff submitted to all the civilian government's demands, marking what has widely been seen as a fundamental change in the military's standing vis-à-vis the politicians.⁶

With the military's role in Turkish political life declining, the Erdogan government has itself already assumed the Kemalist Deep State as grist for the popular conspiracy theory mill. Today, many plainly assert that the AKP government controls the police (especially its surveillance units) and the MIT (Milli Istihbarat Teshkilati, akin to the CIA in the U.S.). This narrative depicts a police force that has been allegedly infiltrated by followers of Fethullah Gulen, the venerated head of a popular Sufi order who resides in the U.S. and presides over a complex international network of institutions and supporters. Gulen's disciples, known as "*Fethullahcıs*," are loyal to him, but they also serve some of AKP's broader political and strategic goals. Prime Minister Erdogan is widely rumored to be himself a devotee of Gulen. Moreover, the current director of MIT, Hakan Fidan, is considered an Erdogan lackey who fully shares the prime minister's agenda and applies it with great zeal. This view is not entirely without reason: Fidan was promoted to the senior MIT job as an outsider, very much despite the protests of top MIT officers who considered him a purely political appointee rather than a professional one.

While popular fears concerning AKP's hidden agenda do not yet match in scale and intensity those regarding the Deep State, AKP's second term in office has given more momentum as well as credence to fears over the party's real motivations. Many fear that AKP seeks to turn Turkey into an Islamic state and to sweep aside in the process the Kemalist legacy and its secular public sphere. These fears include the Islamization of the education system and the creeping imposition of a host of restrictions on public behavior, such as women's dress, the mixing of men and women in entertainment areas, consumption of alcohol, and the loss of other freedoms associated with a modern, liberal, and Western way of life. Others worry about what appears to be the Erdogan government's increasing authoritarianism over the past year and a half. The government's recent assault on journalists who reported on the *Ergenekon* trials without necessarily

toeing AKP's line, as well as the government's harassment of journalists working for the independent Aydin Dogan media conglomerate, have only fueled suspicions of an AKP "deep plan" to install an Islamic dictatorship.

Nonetheless, it is also tempting to exaggerate AKP's new power. Many wrongly interpreted the referendum held early in September 2010 on proposed changes to the constitution as a major victory for Erdogan's party, simply because the party's push for the changes was decisively carried. 58 percent voted for the changes, while 42 percent, led by the main opposition parties to AKP, voted against them. The inaccurate assessment of the results stemmed from the fact that, in addition to AKP, there was also considerable support for the constitutional changes among established Turkish elites who might otherwise support the opposition in the coming elections, as well as young pro-democracy voters. Among other things, the proposed changes included placing limits on the power of the military in politics, opening up judicial appointments to make them more socio-politically representative, and enacting other measures in line with E.U. demands. Moreover, in the lead-up to the 2011 elections, AKP's own handling of Turkey's domestic and foreign affairs helped to alienate key constituencies, just as it has helped to reinvigorate AKP's political opposition at home.

The Rise of an Opposition

OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS ESPECIALLY, AKP AND ITS AMBITIOUS NEW POLICIES HAVE faced mounting criticism. This has come especially from the better-educated and more cosmopolitan segments of Turkish society, although key AKP constituencies have also begun to lose faith in the party. This reflects growing dissatisfaction with AKP's conduct of domestic and foreign business and the overall direction in which it is leading the country. It also reflects a genuine distaste for Prime Minister Erdogan's own gruff and erratic personality. To many, the AKP government is no longer seen as offering a reformist alternative and corrective to the old political order, whose corruption and bankruptcy helped to propel Erdogan and his party to power in 2002. Now, in the run-up to the 2011 elections, AKP faces an invigorated popular opposition that is headed by credible national politicians from the two main rival parties—the leftist *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP), currently led by Kemal Kilichdaroglu, and the nationalist *Milyetchi Hareket Partisi* (MHP), which is led by Devlet Bahcheli.

Much of the harshest and most pointed criticism has focused on the government's policies with respect to the Kurds and other minorities and on what is increasingly seen as AKP's efforts to roll back the Kemalist republic. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's original vision for the Turkish Republic was at its core a nation-building project based on a strong centralized state, a command economy, and a desire for Western-style modernization.

Kemalism's stress on nation-building required the suppression of ethnic groups and minority national identities and, ultimately, their subjection to a national "melting pot" whose language, heritage, self-perception, and ambitions were entirely "Turkish." In the Kemalist perspective, multiculturalism is regarded as divisive and potentially destructive of the republic, and large unassimilated minority populations—most prominently the Kurds, Alevis, Gypsies, and non-Muslims—were widely seen as threats to national cohesion and unity. It was the Kemalist state's policy to coerce these minorities to abandon their native cultures and identities and integrate into a broader "Turkish Nation." Although many individuals from minority ethnic and religious groups have successfully integrated into Turkish society, there has been a persistent underlying anger about real and perceived discrimination toward minorities, and this has produced long-standing frictions and frequent clashes within the republic.

Early on in AKP's rule, inter-ethnic disputes only seemed to intensify, and this was especially the case between Turks and Kurds. To reduce violence and lower tensions, the AKP government began to look for a new way to reconcile the most disaffected groups with Turkish society at large and its political institutions. This led to the launch in 2007 of what has become known as the "Opening Policy," which was inspired to some degree by the *Infitah* or "opening the door" reform agenda for enhancing democracy and liberalizing markets that had been pursued by Anwar Sadat in Egypt in the 1970s. Under the banner of "Democratic Opening" (*Demokratik Achilim*), AKP initially intended these moves to introduce substantial changes to the secular character of the Kemalist nation-state, and to allow for greater religious freedoms, specifically for Muslim movements. But soon this policy was extended to include new government efforts to seek reconciliation with disaffected minority groups. In pursuing this policy, AKP has shown greater willingness than previous Turkish governments to reach out to various minority ethnic groups on a variety of sensitive issues anathema to the Kemalist state, such as enhancing cultural autonomy for minorities and formal recognition of their separate identity within the Turkish Republic. It is possible that the AKP leaders' motivations in pushing for these unprecedented reforms are rooted in their own personal experience. Many of AKP's founding fathers, especially those from the various Islamic factions, had themselves been subject to systematic exclusion and discrimination from power by Kemalist ruling elites. The army and security forces either actively excluded Islamic parties from coalition governments or outlawed their existence altogether.

Another major motivation behind AKP's Opening Policy was and remains the need to address the growing violence associated with the Kurdish PKK underground movement, as well as to shore-up support among its Kurdish constituencies. AKP has strongly committed itself to developing the Kurdish-populated south-eastern provinces, where the government has begun to invest heavily in large infrastructure projects. Indeed, in part as a consequence of this investment, the party duly scored impressive victories in

municipal elections held in those areas in March 2009. During AKP's formation and early years, it successfully recruited many Kurds, including prominent members of the Arslan family, and these activists and supporters also help to explain the party's electoral successes among Kurds.

Nonetheless, despite the ambitious goals of the Opening Policy, there is a growing perception that AKP has failed to make meaningful progress on Kurdish and minority issues; the policy's modest yield thus far has been limited to parallel dialogue tracks between the AKP government and several targeted minority groups, seeking to address some of the latter's basic grievances. The parties involved in the talks discussed possible compromise resolutions with delegations that represented the Kurds as well as Alevis, Roma gypsies, and the main non-Muslim communities. However, these talks have focused on advancing cultural autonomy and the promotion of ethnic identifications, while they have failed to identify new possibilities for full integration into the political system for those people who wished to retain their Kurdish identity—a traditional barrier to acceptance by the Turkish statist elite.⁷ In the case of the Kurds for example, a significant setback occurred towards the end of 2009, when the government declared the main Kurdish party (DTP) illegal, leading to renewed urban and rural operations by the PKK. The Turkish army then became bogged down in an enormously unpopular guerilla war of attrition on the country's south-eastern front, and overflow of this conflict into urban centers was a source of enormous concern for the government. Observers believe that containing this threat of spillover more than any other consideration serves today as the main reason why AKP is still pursuing its Kurdish Opening Policy.

The further AKP pushes its Opening Policy forward, however, the more it risks fueling its political opponents, most notably the CHP and MHP, who have accused the party of seeking to dismantle the Kemalist state and replacing it with a loosely-knit, decentralized alliance of ethnic minorities that enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy under Turkish majority tutelage. The dynamic new CHP leader, Kemal Kilichdaroglu, was elected earlier in 2010 after a sex scandal caused the resignation of Deniz Bayjkal, the party's leader for the past 18 years. The new face of the CHP has helped to revivify a moribund party that was suffering from lack of new ideas and a lackluster leadership. Since his election, Kilichdaroglu has vehemently attacked AKP and its leaders, specifically Erdogan. His adamant opposition to the Opening Policy derives from a fear that the policy undermines the foundation of the Kemalist nation-state, which the CHP helped erect in the early days of the Republic, and that it is ushering in a new multiculturalism that is leading to the "break-up of Turkey."⁸ The fact that Kilichdaroglu himself is of Alevi-Kurdish descent has not hurt and has likely also enhanced his stance on the minorities question, and his rise to political power provides clear evidence of how many minorities have successfully integrated into the Turkish Republic.

Meanwhile, on the political right, the MHP also rejects the Opening Policy on the

grounds that it is leading to multiculturalism and the fragmentation of the Turkish Nation. The MHP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, employs nationalist rhetoric similar to CHP's leaders, but his language is more blatant and aggressive. In April 2010, he delivered a speech asserting that the "so-called Opening Policy" was disastrous and that all considerations of the minorities' demands must end where the potential for any harm to the integrity and unity of the nation presents itself.⁹ In his speech, which the press later dubbed "The So-Called Opening is a Disastrous Catastrophic Project," Bahçeli further claimed that AKP's policies are unconstitutional because they compromise national integrity and that the constitution provides that "the nation and the state are one whole that cannot be divided." Meanwhile, Bahçeli has continued his outbursts against AKP. In June 2010, he provocatively connected AKP's policies to domestic terrorism, claiming that "so long as the Opening Policy continues, it will be impossible to rescue our country from the pains of terror."¹⁰

With the 2011 elections approaching, AKP may seek to rescue its Opening Policy and drive it forward, although party leaders have appeared unwilling to make real, meaningful concessions that meet the basic demands of minority groups. Currently, the government's approach shows no signs of significant change. A great deal clearly depends on how AKP fairs in public opinion polls as the mid-2011 elections approach. Should indications arise that AKP is losing many Kurdish and Alevi voters (the two most significant minorities), public opinion may compel Erdogan and the AKP leadership to improve their offers to minorities at the negotiating table.

A Bull in a China Shop

THANKS IN PART TO AKP'S DOMESTIC ECONOMIC REFORMS AND OPENING POLICIES, Turkish companies in the last ten years have dramatically enlarged their international business activities—and not only with nearby Europe, but especially with developing countries and emerging markets in Central Asia, Africa, Russia, Eastern Europe, Arab countries, and the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹¹ Turkey's total international business rose in recent years from 750 million Euros in 2000 to 23.6 billion Euros in 2008. (Due to the global financial crisis, this number declined in 2009 to 20 billion Euros, although by 2010 it began rising again). In pursuing these new commercial ties, Turks have demonstrated an exceptional adaptability to local business cultures, as well as an impressive financial flexibility, with all the risks that this entails. Turkey's booming business has brought with it financial and political clout on the world stage and has also propelled to the fore more expansive views within AKP about Turkey's special role in shaping the Middle East's future.

New Turkey's foremost political face to the world is Prime Minister Erdogan—a charis-

matic, dynamic, gruff, and divisive politician who is hardly an expert on international relations. When he first came to power, Erdogan did not have well-defined ideas about foreign policy, and his understanding of world affairs today remains narrow and relatively unsophisticated. Raised in Istanbul's Kasim Pasha District, a modest-means neighborhood of working people, Erdogan does not speak any foreign languages, is unfamiliar with foreign cultures, and lacks any significant living experience outside of Turkey.¹² While this background has boosted Erdogan's authenticity and popularity among some voters, it has also meant that the prime minister has depended on the experience and talents of his advisors to handle the many external challenges facing his country.¹³

Erdogan has relied on two men in particular for foreign policy guidance. The first is President Abdullah Gul, who previously served as prime minister as well as foreign minister and who has deep personal roots in the Islamic movement. The second is Professor Ahmed Davutoglu, who now serves as Turkey's Foreign Minister. The basis of Turkey's new foreign policy is widely attributed to Davutoglu, who due to his academic background as professor of political science at Bilkent University in Ankara is well-acquainted with international relations theory and is a sophisticated exponent and defender of AKP's international policies.

Davutoglu's basic approach, commonly called the policy of "Zero Problems with Neighbors" (*Komshularla Sifir Sorun Politikasi*), has been the subject of much recent analysis in various publications.¹⁴ Succinctly put, Davutoglu's vision aims to enhance Turkey's "strategic depth" by minimizing the potential points of conflict between Ankara and neighboring countries by reducing tensions and increasing cooperation and trade. This strategy involves improving relations with countries like Russia, Armenia, Cyprus and Bulgaria, as well as improving relations with majority-Muslim states with which the modern Turkish republic has often had bitter relations, such as Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran. By cultivating bilateral relations with the republic's neighbors, the AKP architects of the Zero Problems policy have sought to create a new regional order that is not encumbered by historical rivalries and instead accrues to Turkey the maximal advantages that could derive from its central geostrategic location as a bridge between East and West, North and South.

In practice, the Erdogan-Davutoglu government has achieved little progress in bringing an end to long-lasting disputes with Armenia, Greece, and Cyprus, and its policies have actually damaged Turkey's traditional influence in some areas—for example, the Caucasus—while advantaging other powers, notably Russia.¹⁵ Indeed, detractors both at home and abroad now regularly claim that "zero problems yields zero results" (*Sifir sorun' politikasi sifir sonuch verdi*), and politicians and pundits have begun to openly question whether AKP's foreign policy is about to collapse entirely.¹⁶

Because the Zero Problems policy has sought to dispense with presumably outdated regional rivalries and reconnect Turkey commercially and in other ways with the wider

Muslim Middle East, many observers have called this new Turkish foreign agenda “Neo-Ottomanism” (*Yeni Osmanlıcilik*). In some ways, this term may be apt. It is reasonable to assume, for instance, that Davutoglu’s worldview is informed, to an extent, by Turkey’s Ottoman past, and this may explain why he regards the Middle East as an important (and also neglected) sphere of Turkish influence and as a realm for which Turkey has, in the foreign minister’s own words, a unique “historical responsibility.”

For his part, Davutoglu has strongly denied ever using the term “Neo-Ottomanism” to describe his views, and he insists that he has no affinity for the term and that it misrepresents AKP’s and his policy stances. In response to a claim raised by the *Financial Times* in November 2009, Davutoglu said, “I have never used this expression inside or outside Turkey.”¹⁷ Indeed, if there is a similarity between AKP’s Zero Problems policy and the actual history of the Ottoman Empire, it is only superficial or coincidental. The Ottoman court, after all, never saw itself as part of the Islamic world in any meaningful way, and the Ottoman diplomatic corps of the nineteenth century was, in fact, well-known for embracing a genuinely European set of traditions, concepts, and diplomatic strategy.

Moreover, the Erdogan-Davutoglu approach has tended to be ideologically-driven and confrontational. Indeed, Erdogan himself once chided the Turkish Foreign Service for its traditionally pro-Western orientation by mockingly referring to Turkish diplomats with the French term “*Mon chérs*.” That comment scandalized the diplomatic corps, and it led a group of retired senior diplomats to send a strongly-worded open letter to the prime minister, criticizing him for driving a wedge between Turkey and the West.¹⁸

In a sharp break with the Euro-centrism of the Ottoman era, not to mention with the pro-Western policies of the modern Kemalist republic itself, the AKP government has presided over a thoroughgoing revamping of Turkey’s relations with the rest of the world that has entailed a general reorientation of the country eastward and away from the West.

Thus far, the Erdogan government has dramatically improved relations between two of Turkey’s historical competitors, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria, although AKP’s leaders may be hard-pressed to explain how these achievements of the Zero Problems policy have actually benefited the republic. Frequent photo-ops with Iranian President Ahmadinejad have clearly elevated the prestige of Prime Minister Erdogan in some quarters of the “Arab street,” especially with radical elements, and may have also boosted the prime minister’s popularity with some Turkish voters. But Ankara’s now cordial relations with these deeply distrusted pariah states have also become a source of deep concern and embarrassment to many Turks who helped bring AKP to power in the first place—including the liberal elites, who increasingly see AKP and its Zero Problems policy as distancing Turkey from its traditional Western allies.

Indeed, Turkey’s warm ties with these oppressive and terror-sponsoring regimes are

a direct cause of the rapid deterioration of Ankara's relations with its traditional allies in the West, namely the U.S., the European Union, and Israel. A number of Ankara's decisions—its vote against imposing sanctions on Iran at the United Nations Security Council, its defense of terrorist groups like Hamas—have all aroused further suspicions in the West over AKP's true intentions. Some have begun to wonder openly whether Ankara might still be considered a reliable NATO ally.¹⁹

Likewise, improved relations with Syria have also come with major costs for Turkey, especially with respect to its relations with the West. At first, Ankara sought to portray opening the borders and tightening the economic and diplomatic relations with Damascus as a major success. AKP sought to claim to Western countries that improved ties with Syria meant that it was now in a position to play an influential role reining in the coalition that includes Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas and reducing regional conflicts. AKP's foreign policy team thus boasted that the New Turkey was indispensable to the achievement of Western interests in the Middle East. However, neither the U.S., the European Union, nor Israel shared this view, and they instead regarded Turkish moves with legitimate concerns that Ankara was abetting the interests of (and even possibly joining with) the region's Iran-led, anti-West bloc.

In addition to souring relations with the West, AKP's new policies have also put it at odds with neighboring Muslim states. The Turkish prime minister's courting of Iran has damaged Turkey's standing in the eyes of pro-Western, moderate Arab states like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and (before the downfall of the Mubarak regime) Egypt. Moreover, while AKP's foreign policy is designed to establish the Turkish republic on a secure footing as a dominant country in West Asia, the Erdogan-Davutoglu approach to regional affairs has actually created new problems for Turkey and imposed new limits on Ankara's ability to maneuver effectively in the region.

For example, AKP cabinet's political support for Islamist terror groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas has also worried Arab states, especially the Mubarak regime in Egypt before its downfall. Continuous high-level diplomatic contact between Turkish officials and these organizations, which are shunned by most Western governments, lends these terror groups the kind of legitimacy that they so desperately seek. Erdogan himself was the first to extend an invitation to Hamas's leadership and host them in Turkey right after they won the Palestinian elections; he continued to support the organization even after they staged their coup against the PLA and took over Gaza. The Turkish Islamist organization IHH—which is widely considered to have strong ties with terror groups, and which organized the recent flotilla that sought to break Israel's arms blockade of Hamas-ruled Gaza—enjoys at least the tacit backing of AKP officials.

Hamas is widely seen as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Mubarak regime, before its collapse, had perceived as a major threat to Egypt's internal stability as well as a rival to the Palestinian Authority, which Egypt under Mubarak backed and

recognized as the only legitimate government in the Occupied Territories. Additionally, Lebanon's Hezbollah, which the Mubarak government regarded as an agent of Iran (the post-Mubarak regime might be inclined to reconsider this view), stands accused of terror attacks in the Sinai Peninsula and beyond, and it continues to be yet another destabilizing force in the region and inside Egypt. Ankara's new friendship with Assad's Syria, one of the two foreign backers with Iran of the Lebanese organization, has hardly warmed hearts in Cairo.

Erdogan and Davutoglu continued to dismiss Egypt until Mubarak's fall, viewing it as a declining power, inert, and laden with problems—a country that stands in sharp contrast to their view of New Turkey as a dynamic, rising power. On the surface, with Egypt now afflicted with massive internal unrest, systematic economic problems, and future uncertainty, this analysis may seem correct. But over the longer-run, the Erdogan-Davutoglu team may also pay a costly price for such working assumptions, given Egypt's central place in the Arab world. Cairo remains the Arab world's most populous, centrally located, leading political power, and cultural hub. Try, as the New Turkey may, to reshape the region, historically little has ever been achieved in the Middle East without major input from Egypt. Although weakened today by its economic vulnerability, Egypt is still a force to reckon with—especially when it acts in tandem with Saudi Arabia to pursue moderate agendas in the region. Although Egypt can be expected to be consumed with its internal affairs for a while, the country has certainly regained great prestige in the Arab Middle East and North Africa due to the courage and determination shown by its people in ousting Mubarak.

Before the revolution, Davutoglu and Erdogan continued to flaunt their newly acquired importance in the region and viewed the New Turkey as an alternative to, rather than ally of, Mubarak's Egypt or any potential moderate bloc. An opportunity for Ankara to change course could emerge in the period ahead, as the political transition to a post-Mubarak Egypt takes place. Whether the Erdogan-Davutoglu cabinet will be adept and flexible enough to properly take measure of these realities and to make such a policy shift remains to be seen. There are strong indications that such a pragmatic change of course will be difficult for AKP's leadership to achieve. It is of little wonder that President Gul was the first head of state to visit Cairo after Mubarak's fall. But this brief sojourn bordered on embarrassing for Turkish leaders, as the Turkish President openly met with the leadership of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood—who, for now, has preferred to remain in the background.

Perhaps the main reason for AKP's inflexibility is not so much its ideological commitments (though these do matter, especially for some party elements) as it is the degree to which the party allows its handling of state affairs to be cast in the politics of national honor and shame. While this has compounded AKP's external challenges, the crisis in Turkey's relations with Israel perhaps most vividly illustrates this aspect of AKP's

handling of foreign affairs. The pathway to the current crisis is now some years old. Already in March-April 2004, Prime Minister Erdogan excoriated Israel for the targeted killings of two top Hamas leaders—Shaykh Ahmad Yassin and Abd al-Aziz Rantisi—calling the assassinations acts “state terrorism” (*devlet teroru*). To appease Jerusalem’s counter-protests, Erdogan sent a delegation of his close associates in the Turkish Parliament to Israel that August. However, after a period of relative calm, the Israeli Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (Winter 2008-2009) threw everything into disarray, and Erdogan responded by calling Israeli soldiers “baby killers”²⁰ and by lending full political support to Hamas. While many commentators understandably saw this as evidence of Erdogan’s and AKP’s Islamist sympathies, it is not so clear that these verbal assaults on Israel were motivated by ideology. Rather, Erdogan apparently felt deeply betrayed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert not informing him in advance of Israel’s attack on Hamas in Gaza, which led to the humiliating failure of the Turkish prime minister’s mediation efforts between Syria and Israel. Subsequently, relations deteriorated further following the Davos incident during which the Turkish prime minister walked away from a panel with President Shimon Peres of Israel. The crisis then hit new lows after the Gaza Flotilla raid in May 2010, in which nine Turkish citizens were killed, scores wounded, and the main vessel, the *Mavi Marmara*, seized.

Save for a few tough statements by Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman, Israeli leaders have by and large refrained from responding in kind to the escalating anti-Israel rhetoric of the Turkish government. By contrast, as the crisis of relations with Israel developed, the AKP government has seemed interested only in exacting apologies from Jerusalem, giving the false impression that Turkey’s slighted national pride and sense of humiliation lie at the core of the troubled bilateral relationship. Although the novel strategic issues associated with New Turkey’s rise and Ankara’s concomitant disentanglement from existing regional security architectures have, in fact, been the root cause of the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations, AKP’s foreign policy team appears dead-set on casting the dispute with Jerusalem in terms of honor and shame.²¹ Most recently, the Turkish prime minister stated that if Israel attacks Gaza again, “Turkey will not sit idly this time.”

Likewise, rather than face U.S. and European criticism and possible alienation over trading an alliance with Israel for closer relations with Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah, in the case of the Marmara Flotilla, Erdogan and Davutoglu prefer to portray Turkey as the victim of unprovoked aggression and humiliation and thereby continue demanding apologies and reparations. The official Turkish position, which is constantly repeated by the prime minister and foreign minister, consists of strict and uncompromising demands for an Israeli apology and compensations to the victims’ families. Attempts by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu—against the better advice of some of his cabinet members—to offer a compromise (including a statement of regret and compensations) have

thus far yielded no results. The next flotilla is scheduled to be launched in mid-May, and the Turkish government has refused to act to prevent its departure from Turkish ports. At the same time, and totally unexpectedly, President Gul has recently invited President Peres to an official visit in Turkey, though it does seem unlikely that such a visit could take place under the current tensions between the two countries.

While their foreign policies have faced enormous criticism both at home and abroad, Turkey's foreign minister and president have repeatedly emphasized that their efforts to re-position Turkey in the region are not meant to injure Turkey's alliances with the U.S. or the European Union. AKP's New Turkey, they stress, seeks good relations with everyone—albeit on the party's own terms. Most fundamentally they desire and also demand recognition from allies, partners, and even rivals of the fact that Turkey is an important regional power that has a vibrant democracy, a booming economy, and a stable political system. They seek recognition that Turkey is a rising power on its way toward assuming an historic role in the twenty-first century.

Be this as it may, one thing has become abundantly clear: the New Turkey's often clumsy and self-defeating maneuvers in the Middle East have thus far betrayed the AKP government's limited knowledge and ability to cope with the region's complexities and competing interests. This has exposed a major weakness in Turkey's new foreign agenda: already disadvantaged by the fact that the Turkish Republic has not been engaged deeply in Middle Eastern affairs since the demise of the Ottoman Empire, AKP finds itself at the helm with grandiose ambitions for the New Turkey but lacking the finesse and *savoir faire* that is essential for any serious player in the Middle East.

Conclusion

AKP'S NEW TURKEY HAS REACHED AN IMPORTANT CROSSROADS. WITH THE 2011 elections looming, the overall impression is that AKP's signature policies of Democratic Opening and Zero Problems have lost their momentum and require revamping. The sense of gridlock in Ankara is bringing enormous pressure to bear on AKP to reassess its top priorities, while it is already embroiled in an election campaign and attempting to fend off strong opposition on all fronts.

AKP faces a tough election campaign and beyond. On the domestic front, should the party's leadership extend substantive concessions to Kurdish and Alevi demands concerning minority rights and enhanced autonomy, they will inevitably face an even heavier backlash from Kemalists and ultra-nationalists. Alternatively, if the leadership withdraws from talks with the minorities, they will probably lose crucial Kurdish and Alevi votes that they will need to retain their dominant hold on power.

Meanwhile, on the foreign front, if the AKP continues in the framework of its Zero

Problems policy to court such radical states as Iran and Syria, Ankara will risk further alienating the U.S. and the European Union—with potentially serious political and economic repercussions. This might consequently mean that the party will lose support of the very pro-Western, liberal, and business elites that have also been critical for past AKP electoral victories. In short, AKP's policies have created for itself a host of unattractive options; in the coming weeks, the party's leadership will need to calculate the risks lurking behind all of these paths forward and make bold decisions.

Currently, polls indicate declining support for AKP and rising support for opposition parties on the right (MHP) and on the left (CHP). While the CHP and MHP are both deeply opposed to the reforms proposed and promoted by AKP, their capacity to forge an alliance to challenge Erdogan's party in the mid-2011 elections is now doubtful at best. Similarly, the splinter groups that exist in the margins of both the right and left appear incapable of merging into larger political blocs that could overcome the 10 percent threshold required for election. As such, it is improbable that the opposition will *in itself* prevent AKP from winning a third term (either by forming a single-party government or, alternatively, by putting together a stable coalition one). In the unlikely event that this occurs, when circumstances are ripe, AKP will probably move to replace Gul with Erdogan as president and will push ahead its policies with renewed vigor.

Nonetheless, if current trends do persist, it is most likely that AKP will lose a measure of its commanding hold on power. While it will probably remain the largest party in the parliament, it may be forced to form a coalition government with either CHP or MHP. Such a result would likely bring AKP's current domestic and foreign agendas to a grinding standstill, for it is difficult to see how a *cohabitation* government might work to further such increasingly unpopular and divisive policies. Indeed, efforts to form a coalition government might even lead to the destabilization of the country's politics yet again.

It is important to stress again that today's New Turkey is primarily the result of a chain of processes, interlinked and often emanating from one another. The migratory shift of a majority portion of Turkey's population from the rural village to urban centers over the past decade and a half opened the way to both modernization and fundamental change in the nature of Turkish family life and society. Better education and greater political participation of that mobile group of formerly rural migrants has facilitated AKP's accession to power—although the party has also required the tacit support of older elites and liberal and modernist elements.

AKP's struggle to hold this broad-based political base together illuminates the profound extent to which the party today embodies the dynamism and complexities of the New Turkey at this historic juncture. On the one hand, there is the Kemalist tradition of the secular and homogeneous Turkish nation-state, while on the other hand there is the reality of modern Turkey's diverse religious and ethnic groups that are struggling for greater political and cultural freedoms. There is the market-oriented democracy that

rests, both geographically and culturally, at the crossroads of East and West. Obviously these poles do not present strict either/or choices, and Turkish democracy, if it is to avoid greater polarization and future destabilization, clearly has before it a choice between several intermediate options that would require compromises on all sides. Fascinatingly, the bidding and sparring over the way forward is also taking place within AKP, a party that may be accurately described as conservative, Islamic-leaning, and control-seeking.

Is AKP courageous and flexible enough to opt for a liberal and truly open society, accepting and encouraging real equality? How will it deal with freedom of speech when it cannot, as but one example, tolerate the Aydin Dogan media group's open criticism of the party's policies and leaders? For the moment, these questions remain unanswered. Much will depend on AKP's capacity to renew itself and offer progress on the domestic scene, while at the same time allaying the West's legitimate fears that its long-time ally in a troubled region prefers the company of states and movements whose commitments are not to democracy or to any of the ideals and freedoms associated with it.

NOTES

1. Some of the more noteworthy papers are: *Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints*, Europe Report No. 203, International Crisis Group, April 7, 2010; and Ahmet Evin et al., *Getting to ZERO: Turkey, Its Neighbors and the West*, Transatlantic Academy, 2010. See also Gallia Lindenstrauss and Oded Eran, "Not Just a Bridge over Troubled Waters: Turkey in Regional and International Affairs," in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2009*, eds. Shlomo Brom and Anat Kurz (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2009), 73-82; and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Mediation and Engagement: a New Paradigm for Turkish Foreign Policy and its Implications for Israel," Memorandum No. 104 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, June 2010).
2. The socio-economic data used in this examination is based on: Guven Sak, *Turkey's regional integration: Is it economic transformation or shift of axis?* Lecture delivered by the Director of TEPA (Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey), May 6, 2010, Tel Aviv.
3. This piece of data appears in: Landon Thomas Jr., "Turning East, Turkey Asserts Economic Power," *NYTimes.com*, July 5, 2010.
4. For the literature on this in both Turkish and English, see my recent review article of Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turks: The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908-1914* (reprinted edition), in *Bustan*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (in press).
5. A good example of this can be found at a website that is entirely dedicated to this conspiracy theory: <http://www.derindevlet.org/>
6. The picture was published in the *Hurriyet* newspaper (*Gundem*), August 9, 2010. The caption below the picture noted the general's avoiding shaking the hand of president Gul's wife (*Aslan Guner, Hayrunnisa Hanimin elini sikmamishti*).
7. For more on this, see *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (April-June 2010).

8. In the beginning of June 2010, for example, Kilichdaroglu visited the national monument commemorating the Turkish soldiers who had fallen during the Gallipoli campaign of World War One. His speech linked the legacy of the fallen heroes (then and now) to an unrelenting commitment to protect a unified Turkish nation. As he declared:

“If we live [today] in security, then the key to that [security] are those who fell in battle. We know this, and even exhibit the respect that we feel towards them. Yet [at the same time], we [strongly] condemn the Opening Policy, which is leading to a break-up of Turkey... The Opening is the odd [idea] of Recep Bey [addressing the PM in person]. Dear Recep Bey, launch an Opening [Policy] for the farmer, the senior citizen, the worker! See the [real]suffering of this nation!... Yesterday, Recep Bey scored an own goal... but if he had only scored an own goal we would be happy; however, you [Recep Bey] hurt [with your kick=your policy] the farmer, the senior citizen, the worker! Unemployment is sky-rocketing, but [instead of acting to remedy that], Recep Bey had something [truly] important to say: “No law determines that every university graduate must be able to find a job.” For God’s sake, if a PM in Germany, France, Japan were to express himself in such a way, he would be removed [from office] the next day...”

It is important to remember here that CHP is a moderate center-left party that claims to represent Turkey’s working and middle classes. Accordingly, in this speech, the party leader was sending a joint message to his two main constituencies: one, nationalist-Kemalist; the other, labor-oriented. *Hurriyet*, June 6, 2010 (Gundem).

9. *CNNTurk.com*, April 11, 2010.

10. *Haberler.com*, June 22, 2010.

11. Here, Turkey excels mainly in “old economy” sectors, namely labor-intensive, traditional industries, such as textiles, raw materials, agricultural products, and large-scale construction projects (airports, highways, bridges, and large public buildings); no major advances in science and technology have thus far contributed to its economic rise. On this topic, see an eye-opening summary recently published in the *New York Times*: Landon Thomas Jr., “Turning East, Turkey Asserts Economic Power,” *NYT*, July 5, 2010. And for additional data on these trends, see: “Tsva Habuldozerim shel Turkiya Bone Bekhol Ha’Olam” (Turkey’s army of bulldozers is building all around the world), *YNET*, July 14, 2010.

12. Despite his personal background, it is fascinating and indicative that at least two of Prime Minister Erdogan’s children, a son and a daughter, are studying in the US.

13. AKP’s opposition has increasingly focused on Prime Minister Erdogan himself. Mr. Erdogan is clearly charismatic and possessed of an impressive capacity for mobilizing the masses and rallying large crowds to his cause. However, these are not predicated upon intellectual skills or sophistication, but rather stem from his being a “man of the people,” or what might be called his “street smarts.” These personality traits have enabled him to survive tough times in his political career, including lengthy imprisonment (for violating the Constitution by publicly reciting a religious poem).

Erdogan has a keen political sense and is quick to adapt, and his abilities to learn lessons from the past failures of Islamic parties equipped him well to launch AKP, maneuver the party around rumors that it secretly harbored an Islamist agenda, and ultimately lead it to national power. The Erdogan of the 2002 and 2007 election campaigns showed himself to be adept enough to appeal to liberal modernists and Kemalists alike, and he also successfully avoided direct confrontation with the army as well as the Legal-Constitutional establishment.

However, since 2007 especially, the prime minister’s blunt and often downright offensive rhetoric towards political opponents at home and abroad has incurred the ire of many and pushed the political

discourse in Turkey to unnecessary extremes. The prime minister's aggressive tone has on many occasions created the impression that Turkey is in a never-ending election campaign, with AKP incessantly engaged in courting its base and repelling counter attacks from opponents.

In addition to his divisive personality, Erdogan is seen as the principal face of the increasingly unpopular Opening Policy toward ethnic minorities as well as of Davutoglu's Zero Problems approach to eliminating conflicts with Turkey's neighbors.

At the same time, however, the prime minister more than any other Turkish leader is identified with Turkey's impressive economic achievements and the remarkable upgrading of its self-image. Even if his rhetoric occasionally provokes pro-Western Turkish modernists; until recent months even they acknowledged his success in effectively stabilizing Turkish politics and re-branding the "New Turkey."

Yet, the events of the past year have hurt Erdogan and AKP because critical assessments of the real results and consequences—as distinguished from mere PR and rhetoric—have surfaced with a vengeance. This is of course natural in periods leading to general elections. Nonetheless, AKP has not been forced to deal with such high levels of voter criticism and disaffection before.

14. See, for examples, notes 1-2 above. For a more current version by the man himself, see: Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, July 10, 2010.
15. The two legislatures have yet to ratify the Turkish-Armenian accords, signed in 2009, and there seems to be no progress in moving forward an agreement that was almost physically forced upon the Erdogan government. The heart of the problem lies in Turkey's demand that Armenia bring its dispute with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabach to a successful, negotiated resolution. Armenian troops still occupy the region, refusing to return it to Azeri control. On June 23, 2010, the Armenian news agency reported that Armenian President Serge Sarkisyan, at a Berlin conference, attacked the Turkish government for its desire "to impose agreements upon its neighbors, rather than coordinate positions with them and take their interests into account." (*Asbarez Armenian News* (Asbarez.com), June 23, 2010).

Despite a conciliatory statement of intent regarding the dispute in Cyprus, AKP has taken no practical steps to advance talks. This stands in contrast to the newly elected President of Cyprus from the Communist Party, who declared his support for a territorial compromise with the north, which the Cypriots previously opposed. Relations between Greece and Turkey have been improving since 1999 (thanks especially to Turkey's assistance to Greece during the earthquake that year), and the Erdogan cabinet demonstrated its commitment to better relations by visiting Athens for a working session with the Greek cabinet. Still, the real test for Ankara will be whether it can reach and implement a resolution of the Cyprus issue. Meanwhile, sovereignty disputes over islands in the Aegean Sea remain a major source of tension between Greece and Turkey, flaring up again in recent months. The Greek Foreign Minister attacked Turkey on July 20, 2010, claiming that Ankara was talking about acting on the Cyprus issues only for PR purposes. He also accused Turkey of adding flame to the tensions in the Aegean Sea and violating international law and Greece's naval sovereignty ("Druchas: Turkiye Ege'de gerginlik yaratmak istiyor," *Hurriyet*, July 19, 2010). Turkey's lagging—and to Ankara, frustrating—E.U. membership talks have long been impeded by the inability of successive Turkish governments (including that of AKP) to overcome Greek and Cypriot opposition, due in turn to those simmering, unresolved issues discussed above.

Warming up to Russia is also part of AKP's policy. However, Russia's suspicions of Turkish intentions have slowed the opening of the border and stemmed the dramatic rise in trade, including strategic energy deals. Russia is keen to retain its strategic influence in the Caucasus and restore its hegemonic position in that region, a goal considerably advanced by Moscow's military intervention

in Georgia. The Russians thus seized the golden opportunity handed to them by the inability of the Erdogan-Davutoglu cabinet to bring the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict to an acceptable resolution facilitating the ratification of their agreement with Yerevan. Acting as a go-between of sorts, Moscow played the various parties against each other and increased its role as a moderating power whose good services were required by all sides.

Growing criticism of Turkey in both Azerbaijan and Armenia led to greater reliance on Russian diplomacy and projected power in the Caucasus at Turkey's expense. A recent Russian policy assessment of the Middle East determined that Turkey lost its position as an "honest broker" in regional conflicts, due to its re-positioning vis-à-vis the US and Europe, and the crisis in its relations with Jerusalem. The Russian analysts concluded that, in the near future, repairing the damage is beyond Ankara's ability. (See Zvi Magen, "Russia: A New Look at the peace process," *INSS Insight*, No. 235, December 20, 2010.)

16. For example, the owner of the blog *Turktime* (September 25, 2010): "Greece, Cyprus, and Armenia are calling on Ankara not to go back on its 'zero problems with the neighbors' policy—is this policy collapsing?"
17. *Star Gazete*, November 25, 2009. The original quote in Turkish runs as follows:
Dishishleri Bakani Ahmet Davutoglu, dun bir gazetede kendine atfen yer alan 'Yeni Osmanlilik' ifdesini ise yalanladi. Davutoglu, "Bir gazetede, benim 'Yeni Osmanlici oldugumu' soyledigim ifade edilmish. Ben hich-bir zeminde, ne Turkiye ichinde ne Turkiye dishinda boyle bir ifade kullanmadim" dedi.
For a further note on this, see also the article by the AKP Vice-Chairman for Foreign Affairs: Suat Kiniklioglu, "'Neo-Ottoman' Turkey?," in *Project Syndicate*, December 3, 2009:
<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/kiniklioglu2>.
18. The open letter to Erdogan was first published in: "'Mon chers' strike back at Turkish PM, accuse him of ignorance," *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 19, 2010.
19. On this, see also Idiz's harsh criticism of the Davutoglu's "Strategic Depth" policy, in "All for the sake of 'strategic depth'," *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 10, 2010.
20. One of the pro-Israel reactions came from the foreign editor of *The Australian*: "The Turkish government is expressing maximum outrage over the Gaza incident, although it has been vastly more brutal in suppressing Kurdish separatists and suspected terrorists than anything Israel has ever dreamed of. The Gaza incident has nonetheless allowed Erdogan to demonise Israel" (Greg Sheridan, "Does Gaza signal Turkey's defection," *The Australian*, June 3, 2010:
<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/does-gaza-signal-turkeys-defection/story-e6frg6zo-1225874725184>).
21. Another good example of just how quickly AKP's handling of state affairs have become inextricably linked up with the politics of honor and shame is the "Low Armchair Crisis" (*Alchak koltuk krizi*), as the incident came to be known in Turkey. In January 2010, Turkey's Ambassador to Israel Oguz Chelikkol was summoned by the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon to receive an Israeli protest over a new Turkish television series with strong anti-Israel scenes. Chelikkol, who had just arrived to replace Ambassador Namik Tan (who is considered a strong friend of Israel, and is now serving as Turkey's Ambassador to the U.S.), was seated on a lower sofa than Ayalon, with only the Israeli flag on the table, and with photographers making sure the picture flashed throughout local and international media. The humiliation was obviously intended, reflecting Israeli impatience and anger at the repeated attacks by Turkey's prime minister and his loyalists in the media. In virtually no time, the ambassador's humiliation scandalized the Turkish media and government.

One of Istanbul's leading newspapers, *Hurriyet*, belabored the issue of "honor," using two

separate terms (*onur*=honor, and *saygınlık*=respect) to illustrate the grave national injury Turkey sustained. (*Hurriyet*, January 12, 2010.) At the time, Deputy Minister Ayalon’s action was condemned across the board in Israel, and President Abdullah Gul demanded an apology “within 24 hours,” which he duly received.

Iran Takes on the World

By Jamsheed K. Choksy

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN IS TODAY CHALLENGING THE WORLD. The Iranian leadership's appetite for power is growing, for they have become thoroughly convinced that no outside power—the U.S. included—will derail their rise to regional and even global prominence. “Whether you like it or not,” the Iranian cleric and politician Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, an influential figure and on-and-off mentor to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, publicly boasted to the U.S., “you have to regard Iran as a great power in the political sphere. The people of Iran have realized there is nothing you can do to us now or will be capable of doing [in the future]. So rather than using all your resources in failed attempts to oppose Iran, you should work with us.”¹

Khatami's statement, like many other recent pronouncements made by the Islamic Republic's leaders, underscores why Iran has not complied with years of American demands for full transparency in its nuclear programs, for putting a halt to its sponsorship of terrorism and propagation of militant Islam or Islamism globally, and for cooperation in regional affairs. Simply put, the Islamic Republic's ruling politicians no longer fear America; they believe the U.S. and its allies have lost the political will to preserve the current order. Tehran, therefore, no longer worries about the repercussions of pursuing an ever-more ambitious policy aimed at refashioning the international order and extending Iranian power and influence.

Students of history know this is not the first time a rising Iran has sought to dominate its neighbors and the world beyond. The first Persian or Achaemenid Empire ruled from Pakistan's Indus Valley to the Libyan Desert and from Central Asia to Turkey between the years 550 and 330 BCE. The second Persian Empire, the Sasanid one, contested both the Roman Empire and the Byzantine Empire from 224 to 651

CE while controlling the trading routes of the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean. Later, the Safavid Empire redefined both Islam and Muslim statecraft in the Middle East and Asia from 1501 until 1760 by, among other things, turning Iranians from Sunnis into Shiites, endowing Iranian Islam with militancy, and directly linking politics to Twelver or Ithna-Ashari Shiism.

It is not simply memories of imperial glory, but active engagement with the past through constant political, social, and religious references, that makes Iranians a most nationalistic people.² Such deeply-felt nationalist sentiments have proven enormously useful to the Islamic Republic's leaders, who have often adeptly appealed to national honor and identity while seeking to advance their hard-line Shiite Islamist vision both domestically and internationally.

However, while imperial Persia's achievements may be a source of national pride, few Iranians today can legitimately feel the same way about the Islamic Republic's present quest for world dominance. Now just over three decades old, the Islamic Republic's efforts to extend its power and influence have inflicted enormous suffering on the region and the Iranian people themselves. As a political venture, Shiite Islamism has been far from successful: Iran's economy and society are in shambles, and, with the exception of a few small groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, Iran's brand of religious fervor has generally failed to take hold elsewhere. While multinational resistance to Iranian expansionism remains inchoate due to lack of international leadership, the Islamic Republic faces mounting popular hostility and backlash abroad. Far more decisive, Iran's international agenda is faltering due to rising popular discontent and anti-regime protests at home, as well as mounting divisions among its ruling elites. Islamic Iran's nuclear program and expansionist policies were the creation of a convergence of Shiite Islamism and Iranian nationalism. Today, the fact that all of these policies are meeting with setbacks is effectively undoing this political convergence, and this has further driven a wedge between secularists among the political elite who increasingly seek a more nationalistic basis for pursuing Iranian glory and Islamists who will not be swayed from theocracy.

Indeed, despite its bravado on the world stage, the Islamic Republic's multiplying failures have devastated whatever legitimacy it might have claimed for itself, and moreover, produced a widening gap between Iranian nationalism and the Shiite Islamist institutions upon which the Islamic Republic was founded. Tellingly, the regime is tightening its grip on dissent at home, and has also placed high-profile reformists once closely linked with the regime under house arrest, including now deceased Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, Mir Hussein Mousavi and Seyyed Mehdi Karroubi. These internal splits have only been exacerbated as Iran's leaders have pressed their expansionist agenda internationally. In time, these ever-growing strains on the Islamic Republic may ultimately lead to its undoing.

Revolutionary Ideology Meets Nuclear Power

IN THE WAKE OF THE 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION, IRAN DECLARED ITSELF AT WAR WITH the United States and professed its desire to become a world power through propagating Islamist revolution globally. In recent years, the world has begun to take Iranian ambitions more seriously as a consequence of the maturation of its now decades-old nuclear program.³ To Iran's leaders, nuclear power and its weaponization represent security for the regime as well as a means by which Iran's internationalist agenda might be enlarged. It has also become a way for the Islamic Republic to shore up its rule domestically, as the nuclear power has allowed Iranian politicians to fuse nationalist aspirations with the Shi'ite Islamist ideology upon which the regime was founded.

Western governments and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have concluded that within a few years the Islamic Republic could refine large batches of weapons-grade or highly enriched uranium (HEU, containing 90 percent or more U-235). Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Lieutenant Commander General Hossein Salami noted, "We have reached a never-ending point in [increasing] the quantity of our ballistic missiles."⁴ Those missiles—and the possibility that one day soon they will carry nuclear payloads—frighten many nations, including Israel, which has thus far borne the brunt of Islamism's warmongering threats, as well as other states in the region like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia who resist Iran's imperialist ambitions.

Of course, the political leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran have consistently denied they seek anything more than nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. They claim their nuclear pacifism is based on traditional Islamic teachings. Current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei claimed in February 2010, "We've said time and again that our religious principles and beliefs consider such weapons to be a symbol of destruction whose use is forbidden." Indeed, Iran's revolutionary mentor and first supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini initially declared nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction to be *haram* or forbidden, by Islam generally and by Shi'ism specifically, in a *fatwa* issued during the Islamic Republic's enormously bloody war with Iraq (1980-1988).

Despite this early resistance to nuclear weapons on traditional religious and humanitarian grounds, the Islamic Republic's clerics, politicians, and intellectuals later began to gradually reconcile weapons of mass destruction with Islamic tenets. For instance, influential clerics like Mohsen Gharavian declared in a *fatwa* that the

“use of nuclear weapons may not constitute a problem, according to Sharia, but be only natural.” Gharavian’s mentor, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, among other ultra-hardline clerics, has also approved “of all means necessary, since religion necessitates the victory of believers.”⁵

Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani laid the groundwork for Iran’s nuclear revival during an October 1988 speech to the IRGC. Rafsanjani, who was the Speaker of Iran’s *majles* or parliament at that time, called for the development of nuclear and other unconventional weapons because the need for such armaments “was made very clear during the [Iran-Iraq] war ... [so] we should fully equip ourselves both in the offensive and defensive use of chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons.” Rafsanjani claimed the survival of “both Iran and Shiism are paramount.” Likewise, Mohsen Rezai, then commander of the IRGC, wrote to Supreme Leader Khomeini requested permission for the revolutionary guards to initiate a nuclear weapons program “to protect religion and state.” Mousavi, who served as Iran’s Prime Minister from 1981 to 1989, supported the requests by Rezai and Rafsanjani. Indeed, state and religion have been seen as twins throughout the entirety of Iranian history and political thought. The Sasanian state’s manifesto was “faith and state were born of one mother, joined together never to be sundered.” Of course, the Zoroastrian religion of ancient Iran to which the Sasanians and most of their citizens subscribed did not espouse global militancy like modern *mullahs* or Muslim clerics do.⁶

Then Supreme Leader Khomeini eventually relented, saying “we have nothing against setting up atomic installations.” Subsequently, as a two-term president of Iran (1989-1997), Rafsanjani ensured that Iran would fully resume its quest for nuclearization. His presidential successor, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), and Ahmadinejad (2005-present) have continued the program while further integrating it into Iran’s Islamist and nationalist ideologies.⁷

Given this convergence of nationalism with religious zeal, both firmed up by anti-Westernism and by Iran’s devastating experience in its border war with Iraq, it should not be surprising that the majority of Iranian politicians, including individuals now in opposition to the regime, support their country’s nuclear ambitions. Hence, Iran is unlikely to abandon either nuclear power or the possibility of weaponization even if regime change occurs there. The negative responses by Mousavi, Rezai, Rafsanjani, and former Speaker turned presidential candidate Karroubi to Ahmadinejad’s attempts to reach a nuclear fuel swap deal with the West in 2009 and again in 2011 serve as confirmation of this stance. Indeed, many of Iran’s Shiite clergy believe that so long as Western superpowers can be held up as a threat to the survival of Shiism and Iran, they can cling to power through militantism. Moreover, non-clerical as well as secular politicians as diverse as Ahmadinejad and Mousavi believe the same foreign bogeymen will fuel nationalism in their political favor.

They point to events involving the other two countries labeled by the U.S. as elements of the “axis of evil,” believing that nuclear power saved North Korea from the fate that befell Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.⁸

Thus, they conveniently accept the ideas of Islamist ayatollahs like Mesbah-Yazdi who propose that Iran should “not deprive itself of the right to produce special weapons.”⁹ According to this interpretation, both Islam with its *umma* or community of believers and the Iranian nation with its Shiite citizens must be defended at all costs.¹⁰

Despite this support, Iranian leaders are becoming increasingly unsuccessful in their nuclear goals. The Stuxnet computer worm slowed Iran’s nuclear quest by 20 to 25 percent, pushing the possible deployment of a nuclear weapon to 2014 or 2015. Assassination of nuclear scientists has compounded that problem. Both situations showed Iran that it is vulnerable to outside, non-military, interventions. Indeed, President Ahmadinejad was forced to acknowledge publicly that “it would be premature for Iran to count on a nuclear bomb in global power dynamics, for our bomb is without sound or physical shape.” Moreover, international sanctions seem to have forced draconian economic belt-tightening and slowed the flow of resources to Iran’s nuclear program. Iranian leaders have needed to scramble to reestablish and maintain sources and suppliers of technology, raw materials, and hard currencies for their nuclear program, while trying to maintain a steady flow of dwindling basic amenities for the country’s citizens—as revealed by WikiLeaks cables.¹¹

A World Strategy

FROM THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC’S VIEWPOINT, NUCLEAR POWER REFLECTS ONE VITAL step in the overall progression toward world domination. By offering to share “the experience, knowledge and technology of its [nuclear] scientists” with other Third World nations, Iran’s leaders seek to undermine the current superpowers’ control over nuclear technology and the international institutions that govern it, all the while expanding Iran’s clout militarily, politically, and ideologically. But this is only one step. Most of all, they desire to exclude the U.S., E.U., and Israel from playing any role in the Middle East and Asia. By facing down the U.S., Britain, France, and Germany, and by constantly attempting to split Russia and China from other nations in the Security Council over the nuclear issue, Iran seeks to demonstrate to the rest of the world that America and its partners are no longer pre-eminent. In so doing, Iran is trying to return to prominence on the world stage “as a great and proud inheritance” from its historical empires but with a demonstrably militant Shiite flavor.¹²

President Ahmadinejad’s own words show that Iran’s politicians are attempting

to craft a new world order: “We need to establish new systems and take measures based on those systems ... Many countries will join the new systems.” Such comments indicate the rationality of Iran’s leadership’s geopolitical maneuvers. They are testing the limits of American power and influence and of the current world order, seeking to prove that both are limited to hollow words and ineffective deeds. As noted earlier, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami and other radical clerics approve of this relentless but calculated Iranian challenge to the West, hoping it will spread not only Iran’s nationalist views (which many of them, on theological principle, only barely tolerate) but, more importantly, their own fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.

One part of this nationalistic and Islamist-based expansionist policy is economic, another part diplomatic, yet another militaristic, and still another educational.

Energy is a key part of Iran’s international economic strategy. For example, Iran is aiding construction of power plants and dams in Lebanon in a move to shore up its influence in a nation bordering both Israel and the Mediterranean Sea. Syria and Iran have worked on energy and heavy industrial expansions together too. Those activities also provided cover when Syria began collaborating with Iran to obtain technology and raw materials for its own nuclear plant at al-Kibar until that facility was destroyed by Israeli bombs in September 2007. Across the Persian Gulf, in a sign of strengthening links between the IRGC and its own defense forces, Oman cooperates with Tehran on matters of mutual security in addition to staging joint military exercises.¹³

In the Horn of Africa, Iran and Sudan are establishing economic ties based on Iranian maritime use of Port Sudan as a transit between the Suez Canal and the Arabian Sea. Not all the goods transferred there are benign, however. U.S. intelligence sources fear Port Sudan has become a shipping point for Iranian arms to Hamas in Gaza and to Islamist organizations in both North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Iranian corporations, often owned by the IRGC, are prospecting for and purchasing Sudanese gold and lithium to circumvent international sanctions on dual-use minerals. Again, Tehran’s aims are less than peaceful—for many of the mineral deposits needed for Iran’s weapons program are found in South Sudan. Hence, the Islamic Republic is reaching out to rebels there as that region becomes independent. Likewise, Iran has reinforced its links with Shiite militias and politicians in Iraq in order to ensure that the successful rebuilding of its neighbor will require Tehran’s cooperation.¹⁴

On the eastern fringes of the E.U., Iran is suspected of influencing Turkish politics by funding Islamist parties and training Muslim clerics in Anatolia. Likewise Iran is expanding its economic presence in that nation, which bridges Asia and Europe, through bilateral trade targeted to reach the equivalent of U.S. \$30 billion. Iranians and Turks move freely across the border between the two countries, and Iranian companies circumvent U.N. sanctions by means of Turkish companies. Energy coop-

eration by the two regimes includes the Tabriz-Erzurum gas pipeline. If and when the Nabucco pipeline eventually connects Turkey to Austria, the E.U.'s reliance on Russia as a source of energy will be replaced by dependence not only on Turkey as a transshipment point but also on Iran as its supplier.¹⁵ Through these religious and economic ties, Iran has found an ally in Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who joined in demanding that Arab leaders like Mubarak be ousted and replaced with Islamic regimes. Likewise, Iran and Turkey have begun to share a common goal in supporting Palestinian statehood and Hamas' role in Gaza and the West Bank.¹⁶

Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, a former IRGC commander, emphasized the value to Iran of all these forms of involvement, claiming that as a consequence "Iran enjoys a high geopolitical status and has become a great power in the Middle East." Yet, this foreign adventurism added to calls among Americans and Israelis for a preemptive strike against Iran with an expectation that Tehran's leaders cannot hope to win such a military confrontation. Indeed, Tehran downplays any prospect of its becoming involved in a "hot war"—saying instead that its policies of asymmetrical warfare and cold war will bring about "sweet and silent death" to Western power and influence.¹⁷

These developments are not merely the result of endeavors by the Islamic Republic. When the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century transformed Iran from a Sunni state into a Shiite one, it recruited mullahs from among coreligionists in Lebanon, southern Iraq, Bahrain and other Gulf nations, and also Kashmir. Those familial, intellectual, and religious ties have endured over the subsequent generations. Through these linkages, Iran still shapes sociopolitical events in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf region not merely by using financial incentives and ideological affinities but also by drawing upon the personal connections between clerical families. In Iraq, for instance, political infighting among the various parliamentary parties permits Tehran to serve as a powerbroker among the Shiite polity there as the U.S. military presence winds down. The same holds true in Lebanon where Hezbollah's ties to Iranian mullahs run much longer and deeper than that country's post-civil war sociopolitics.¹⁸

Iran has been cultivating connections with economically strapped former Soviet states like Belarus and Azerbaijan as well—investing the equivalent of more than U.S. \$1.5 billion on development projects and agreeing to energy exchanges, respectively, in exchange for cultural and confessional access to Muslim populations there.¹⁹ Iran has focused considerable attention over the past few years on the governments in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, challenging the secular Russian and democratic American influences on those Central Asian nations.²⁰ The Iranians appear to be playing both sides in the Afghan struggle by financing the government of President Hamid Karzai with

cash payments of over U.S. \$500 million, while providing training and supplying weapons to the Taliban. Again, as in Iraq, the Iranian government is attempting to position itself as a socioreligious, political, and diplomatic powerbroker that can effect, should it wish, the termination of hostilities and reconciliation between factions within Afghanistan.²¹

Iran has additionally been negotiating a natural gas pipeline to India via Pakistan so that it can become a major supplier of energy throughout South Asia. Iran's energy clout in India, created by dependence on oil and gas, forced the Reserve Bank of India (that nation's central bank) to find an alternate means—utilizing Euros and a joint German-Iranian bank—to continue commerce after the U.S. and E.U. blocked dollar-based payment by India to Iran through the Asian Clearing Union.²² Additionally, Iran's mullahs know that India's Shiite and Sunni minorities feel sidelined by Hindus and are thus susceptible to radical influences. Because of this, Iran is channeling funds, educational materials, and religious teachers into Indian Muslim groups.

Further to the southeast, the IRGC's Quds Force reportedly trains officers of Sri Lanka's army and intelligence service while Iran Navy destroyers dock in the island's ports. Iran is constructing oil refineries there both for domestic Sri Lankan use and for export. A steady convoy of Iranian merchant vessels passes through Sri Lankan ports bearing small electronics for sale and utilizing the island as a transit point for shipments of oil to and from China. Moreover, China has begun cooperating with Iran to fund construction of deep-water ports not only at the Sri Lankan capital city of Colombo but also along the island's southern and eastern shorelines. These ports, once operational, will strengthen the Iran-China alliance—benefiting Iran by permitting more of its exports to reach not only Sri Lanka and China but also countries in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, establishing economic and military footholds in Sri Lanka facilitates both Iran's and China's use of their military ties as a challenge to American and British mercantile and naval dominance in the Indian Ocean.²³ Yet again, Iran's thrust even on this Indian Ocean island is not merely military and economic. Iranian clerical foundations or *bonyads* are opening cultural centers and religious schools among Sri Lanka's small Shiite and Sunni communities.

As a result of Tehran's active courting, and through shared economic and military ties, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has replaced the E.U. as Iran's largest trading partner. Billions of dollars of Chinese capital have become the mainstay of Iran's oil and gas industries, and so indirectly sustain Iranian nationalism and Shiite Islamism too.²⁴ The PRC-Iranian economic alliance reaches well beyond the Indian Ocean. The PRC and Iran have joint ventures to develop gas and oil fields in collaboration with Malaysian companies. Iranian *bonyads* and IRGC-owned corporations have opened offices in many major cities of Indonesia as well. Again, Iran is utilizing its multi-pronged thrust to gain influence within the world's most populated

Muslim country, which is already experiencing a rise in homegrown fundamentalism.²⁵ As a result, not only has Jakarta endorsed the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's presidency, but it has also voiced support at the United Nations for a peaceful Iranian nuclear energy program. Further to the northeast, even a major U.S. ally like South Korea increasingly feels the need—despite American displeasure—to position itself in a neutral capacity toward Iran due to its own lucrative trade connections with the Islamic Republic.²⁶

Building strong ideological, diplomatic, economic, and military ties with Latin American countries—a region considered U.S. dominion since the articulation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823—is one more aspect of Iran's plan for globalizing its influence. Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Brazil, and not surprisingly Cuba are forming alliances with Iran aimed at limiting and even challenging U.S. goals for security, stability, democracy, and development in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Brazil has even let Iran influence its relationship with the Palestinian Authority, and Brasilia now recognizes Palestine as an independent nation. Iranian parliamentarians hail their country's growing ties with Latin American nations as “exporting revolution to the backyard of the U.S.” As part of Iran's adventurism in the western hemisphere, the IRGC is believed to engage in weapons sales to Venezuela and Bolivia via its ally Syria in violation of U.N. sanctions. It now intends to expand that activity by “sharing its military know-how and exporting its products” to many other Third World nations via Latin America, a move which like nuclear proliferation would extend Tehran's global reach.²⁷

Ahmadinejad has made several visits to Caracas and Hugo Chavez has traveled back and forth to Tehran as ties between the two nations have strengthened. Iran has invested approximately \$40 billion in the Venezuelan economy, including joint ventures for prospecting and mining rare minerals—including uranium. Chavez's regime may be exporting those prohibited materials to Iran. Iranian banks based in Caracas circumvent banking restrictions imposed by the U.S. Treasury, funneling funds to terrorist and fundamentalist organizations located in both Africa and Asia. In return, Iranians have assisted Venezuela's nascent nuclear ambitions.²⁸ Likewise, Bolivia's President Evo Morales makes annual visits to Tehran not only to discuss bilateral cooperation but also, in his own words, to “undermine the capitalist system.”²⁹ U.S. officials believe the IRGC is involved with Venezuelan, Bolivian, Brazilian, and Colombian drug cartels—supplying them with munitions in exchange for rare earth minerals while also hoping that narcotics and gang violence will bring down America and other Western societies. Iran's efforts may be expanding into Ecuador too, with Ahmadinejad courting its president, Rafael Correa, for similar reasons.³⁰ Again, all these activities are a part of Iran's at times convergent but now increasingly contradictory policy of globalizing nationalist and Islamist goals.

When dealing with poorer nations in Asia and Africa, Iranian officials extend development aid, preferential trade status, and community-based services as means of making headway into those societies. Sub-Saharan African countries increasingly regard Iran as a “reliable partner.”³¹ Indeed, Iranian leaders are teaming up with other despotic regimes like Robert Mugabe’s in Zimbabwe to criticize the existing global order that seeks to change their behaviors. In meetings with his counterparts, former Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki attempted to cast both Iran’s Islamist ideology and international role in altruistic terms: “The Islamic Revolution was not only for Muslims, but for all the dispossessed people of the world.” Yet, again, Iran’s motives are far from altruistic; Zimbabwe, for example, has deposits of uranium that Tehran wishes to access for its “Shiite nuclear program.”³²

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) with its one hundred and eighteen member states, sixteen observer nations, and nine observer organizations has been a focus of Iranian overtures too. When the NAM’s foreign ministers met for their 15th meeting in July 2008, Tehran took center stage as the host city. A public statement by the attendees at that ministerial conference lent support to Iran’s nuclear program, warning against action by the U.S. and other nations wary of proliferation. In June 2010, the NAM reiterated its support for Iran’s nuclear program and for a trilateral fuel swap deal—and it has even inexplicably praised Iran for its “cooperation with the IAEA”! The NAM’s 16th Summit will be held at Kish Island in 2012, where Ahmadinejad will assume the Secretary-Generalship of that influential multinational organization. This leadership will give Iran yet another global platform to air its fundamentalist views, radicalize other Third World nations, and work against the West.³³

Iran’s expanding role in the Group of Fifteen (G-15)—now numbering seventeen member states—enables it to influence developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In May 2010, Tehran hosted the 14th Summit of that international organization where Ahmadinejad used the opportunity to deride the U.N. Security Council, question the free market entrepreneurial system, and champion Iran’s growing role as a country leading the opposition to the U.S., E.U., and Israel.³⁴ Subsequently in 2011, Iran’s Foreign Minister Ali Asghar Soltanieh was elected chairman for the G-77, which now covers 130 nations.³⁵ Likewise, Iran hosts meetings of the Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) whose thirty-one member states include those in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council. Again, Ahmadinejad utilizes these gatherings as public platforms to champion Iran’s global agenda: “We need a new order ... it has become clear that the order stemming from Western materialist ideology has failed both in theory and in practice.”³⁶

At the U.N., Iran has steadily acquired seats on the governing boards of several major agencies.³⁷ It also has maneuvered its way onto the Commission on Science and Technology for Development under the Conference on Trade and Development,

and onto the Office of Drugs and Crime. Iran has even held the vice chairmanship of the Executive Council of the U.N. Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the chairmanship of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. Iran seems to wager that leadership roles in such international agencies will translate into perceptible power. So, for instance, it is employing knowledge and technology gained via these agencies to develop both low orbital satellites for Defense Ministry and IRGC reconnaissance use and booster rockets that could not only carry the satellites but also deliver conventional and nuclear payloads. Secularist Iranian leaders like President Ahmadinejad view these endeavors as building up a strong nationalistic nation; activist mullahs see Shiite missiles and bombs as an extension of their religious might.

Within the U.N. Security Council itself, Iran has often succeeded in dividing Russia and China from the three other permanent members—namely, the U.S., Britain, and France. Russia’s loading of fuel into the Bushehr reactor in August 2010 was a stark example of Iran exploiting superpower rivalry for its own ends. Likewise, Iran convinced Prime Minister (and former President) Vladimir Putin to declare that Russians “don’t have any grounds to suspect Iran, in the sense that they seek to possess nuclear arms.” Moreover, in early January 2011, just prior to a resumption of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran in Istanbul, Russia again warned the U.S. not to sabotage nuclear talks by upping sanctions against Iran.³⁸ Through consistent diplomacy, Iran has gained the cooperation and support of several rotating members of the Security Council as well—especially Turkey, Brazil and Lebanon. As a result, Iran’s leaders, and particularly Ahmadinejad, dismiss the Security Council’s following of the U.S., Britain, and France as turning it into a “discriminatory, unjust, and the most undemocratic international body.” They show little respect for its authority. Thus, even the U.N. has become a platform for disseminating Iranian ideologies and for thwarting American and European ideals. Consequently, Iran’s leaders feel a “sense of power,” independence, and accomplishment that emboldens them to challenge the world’s great powers.³⁹ That challenge is both nationalistic and Shiite Islamist, and it is intended to lead Iran into primacy on both fronts.

The World Transformed

IN THE MIDST OF THE PRESENT-DAY UPRISINGS IN THE ARAB WORLD, THE ISLAMIC Republic is attempting to seize what it perceives as new opportunities to make its power felt. Iran’s leaders and their Islamist ideology have thus far not been a major force behind the large-scale street protests that erupted in the Winter of 2011 against Jordanian monarch Abdullah II, Bahraini King Hamad al-Khalifa, and Yemeni President

Ali Abdullah Saleh, the rebellion against Libya's colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi, or in the ousters of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. But this has not stopped Iranian ayatollahs, including Khamenei, Ahmad Khatami, and Mesbah-Yazdi, from claiming—even as they suppressed renewed protests over festering discontent at home—that the Arab uprising was an “Islamic awakening reminiscent of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.”⁴⁰

Iranian mullahs point to years of ideological and operational cooperation with the Arab Muslim Brotherhood and regard Egypt's Brotherhood and the ideologically affiliated Jordanian Islamic Action Front as the heirs of Iran's revolution-era seminary and university students (even though the Arab Brotherhoods were established long before the Iranian revolution, and are also Sunni). As is well documented, a key pillar of Iran's regional strategy for influence has involved providing ideological and financial assistance to Islamist movements like the Brotherhood. Military aid is extended as well to some of those militant Sunni organizations like Hamas, an offshoot of the Brotherhood. Indeed, the Hamas leadership has publicly thanked Tehran for its “limitless support” of Islamist movements.⁴¹

Through its outreach, Iran's leaders envision the emergence of new Arab governments led by fundamentalist Islamist leaders—like, though not necessarily identical to, Iran's *velayat-e faqih* with its supreme leader as Allah's representative on earth. Iran does not expect such new polities (should they emerge) to be absolutely loyal to it or to its supreme leader; rather, Iranian political elites believe that Islamist nations will likely turn to Tehran for guidance on international affairs. As such, Tehran provides financial and instructional support for madrasas and for Islamic centers, both Shiite and Sunni, in countries with Muslim majorities as diverse as Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In addition it provides support to countries where Muslims are far from the largest confessional group, such as India, Sri Lanka, Brazil, and even Canada. The ranks of those trained in Iranian and Iranian-influenced madrasas include not only influential Iraqi Shiite clerics like Ayatollah Moqtada al-Sadr (leader of the Mahdi Army) and Hassan Nasrallah (Secretary General of Hezbollah) but also many less well-known mullahs. The latter are perhaps even more persuasive in shaping the minds of younger Muslims toward militancy and Islamism than the former. They also earn their livelihoods teaching at institutions like Kabul's Khatam al-Nabyeen Islamic University and Toronto's Iranian Islamic Center where the curriculums, inflammatory speeches, and intolerant attitudes are virtually indistinguishable from those in Iranian madrasas—even the textbooks come from Iran. Students at these institutions, some of whom will become Muslim clerics and *qadis* or jurists, learn and internalize Shiite militancy. Indeed, in Supreme Leader Khamenei's vision of the future, “Islamism is the most powerful force.”⁴²

According to Supreme Leader Khamenei, Iran seeks a region-wide “Islamic awak-

ening” and the establishment of new regimes “based on religion.”⁴³ Iran’s theocrats hope events in the Arab world will create a unified Muslim Middle East that looks to Tehran for support and guidance in a common struggle against the West. With this end in mind, Iranian leaders have not hesitated to back protests against pro-Western regimes. The Majles’ Speaker Ali Larijani announced, “Our parliament supports the uprising of the Tunisian and Egyptian people for it is the revolution of the noble.” Not to be outdone, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi asserted Iran’s desire that “Egyptians’ high aims, national demands, and resurrection of their glory could be achieved in the very near future.” One tangible benefit to Iran has been post-Mubarak Egypt’s desire to resume full diplomatic relations with Tehran.⁴⁴

The important role of Qatar-based Al-Jazeera in spreading news of the protests on Arab streets has been well documented, but less attention has been given to the impact of Iranian media. Indeed, the Islamic Republic News Agency and the semi-official Mehr and Fars news agencies also command substantial audiences across the Middle East. Through those outlets, combined with a network of fundamentalist preachers trained by the state, Tehran’s exhortations regularly reach Arab Sunni Muslims alienated from the status quo and susceptible to radicalization. Not surprisingly, portions of the Arab press found common ground with Iran’s state-controlled media, as their optimism for change overlapped with Iranian anti-Western propaganda, in claiming, “Pro-Western Arab Countries in Turmoil.”⁴⁵ The Iranian regime’s outreach has never been simply media-based, however. Tehran provides hundreds of scholarships for Arab, Asian, and African students to attend Iranian universities and madrasas. Iran additionally supports numerous pan-Islamic youth organizations’ missionary work and hosts their gatherings.⁴⁶

Iran covertly provides the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt with millions of dollars for political and religious endeavors. Paralleling activities in southern Lebanon via Hezbollah, Iran directs resources through the Brotherhood to increase radicalism among poor and middle-class Egyptians. Iran’s funds facilitate the Brotherhood’s role in street protests as well. The uprising enabled thirty-four Brotherhood leaders to escape from Egyptian custody. Those ideologues will play important roles not just in shaping protests but also in Egypt’s future as a whole; and they are beholden to Tehran. “You can call this an Islamic revolution,” predicted Essam el-Erian, a prominent Brotherhood leader.⁴⁷

Likewise, Iranian diplomats and news media heralded the return of fundamentalist preacher Rashid Ghannouchi to Tunis after more than two decades in exile. Having established ties with Ghannouchi during his years in London, Iran’s mullahs are counting on him to propel the *Harakat al-Nahda al-Islamiya*, or Islamic Renaissance Movement, to the forefront of Tunisian politics. Essentially, Tehran seeks an outcome through Ghannouchi like that of Ayatollah Khomeini’s return to Iran from

Paris in February 1979—a fundamentalist takeover. Espousing anti-Western Arab sentiments no longer shields Arab leaders from Tehran’s machinations either. Libya’s Muammar el-Qaddafi quickly became a target as the mullahs sought to radicalize hitherto largely quietist political establishments elsewhere in North Africa.⁴⁸ So Iran makes unfounded claims of its ideology having triggered the Libyan rebellion.

The Islamic Republic has for many years provided weapons, cash, and indoctrination to Hezbollah cadres in Lebanon. Hezbollah’s current Secretary General Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah was not only trained in the madrasas at Qom but also later represented the organization in Tehran. The transformation of Hezbollah from an anti-Israeli militia into a street-savvy Shiite political party that today dominates Lebanese politics is one of the greatest triumphs of the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy. Mullahs trumpet the Iran-Hezbollah alliance as a fundamentalist, Islamist counterthrust against moderate Sunni Arabs.⁴⁹

At the other end of the Arab world, Iran is attempting to ensure that Houthi Shiite rebels seizing territory along Yemen’s border with Saudi Arabia will look to Tehran for guidance. Certainly the Yemeni government fears the worst, especially as the Arab uprising has taken hold there and citizens from different political and socio-religious backgrounds are demanding the ouster of President Saleh’s pro-American regime. So, too, are Iran’s ties with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula strong, despite the fact that the Houthis and al-Qaeda are fighting each other as well. Although not fully trusting the Sunni al-Qaeda terrorists or the Zaydi Houthi, the Ithna-Ashari, or Twelver Shiite mullahs of Iran, have not hesitated to use them as fronts for spreading Tehran’s influence and ideology through violent battles and street protests in Sanaa and other towns.⁵⁰

Closer to home, Tehran’s mullahs see political and religious opportunities in Bahrain as that Gulf nation’s Shiite majority seeks to cast off the yoke imposed by a Sunni ruling class. Allying themselves with Bahraini Shiites brings the Iranian fundamentalists even closer to Saudi Arabia’s restless Shiite underclass, including especially those located in the Arabian kingdom’s oil-plentiful eastern province. Attempts by the Sunni ruling family of Bahrain to violently quash the majority Shiite population’s aspirations using Saudi Arabian and U.A.E. troops plus Pakistani Baloch mercenaries, coming as it did on the heels of visits to that Gulf nation by American politicians and generals, played right into militant Iranian clerics’ hands. The presence of U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates there just days before the Gulf Cooperation Council’s Peninsula Shield Force entered the island has been construed and condemned by Bahraini Shiites and Iranian politicians as tacit U.S. approval for the bloody crackdown.⁵¹

Internal Struggles and Worldwide Repercussions

EVEN AS TEHRAN PUSHES TO EXPAND ITS INTERNATIONAL REACH, A BATTLE IS brewing at home as motives and goals diverge between post-Khomeinist, secular-leaning Iranian nationalists and Shiite Islamists who are the heirs of the 1979 revolution. In this particular struggle, which is distinct from the one where religious and non-religious reformers like the Green Movement wish to oust all political incumbents, the executive branch led by President Ahmadinejad and a group of technocrats from within the military and bureaucracy is attempting to slip off the leash placed on Iran's foreign affairs by the Shiite clerical establishment.

For Ahmadinejad and his aids, often known collectively as the Principlists, the key to winning this struggle begins with re-grounding Iranian politics and the state in traditions other than Shiite clericalism. They've focused especially on revivifying the older traditions of Iranian nationalism. In a widely reported and revealing event, for instance, President Ahmadinejad beamed at a 2010 meeting in Tehran for Iranian expatriates when his then Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei (a potential successor to Ahmadinejad) announced, "We must present the tradition of Iran to the world. Without Iran, Islam would be lost. We should wave the Iranian flag." Essentially, Ahmadinejad and Mashaei were borrowing a page from the last Shah's playbook by embracing Iran's "great and proud inheritance" from ancient—and also pre-Islamic—times. They also, for instance, celebrated the short-term return (from the British Museum) of the Cyrus Cylinder—a document from the sixth century BCE that hails the imperial rule of Cyrus the Great. Nav Roz or Persian New Year, on March 21st, has become a platform for Ahmadinejad to laud Iran's mighty imperial past plus its renewed ties with neighboring states by hosting multinational celebrations with other heads of state.⁵²

To acquire more power over foreign policy, Ahmadinejad has directly appointed his own special envoys on international affairs—bypassing even the Foreign Ministry, which is still technically under the president's jurisdiction, though not always willing to follow in lockstep. He then fired Foreign Minister Mottaki, who was close to the supreme leader, so that the more xenophobic Khamenei will have as little say in foreign relations as possible.⁵³

The ambitious internationalism of men like Ahmadinejad and his former right-hand man Mashaei have cost them the support of the Islamic Republic's most powerful clerics. One main point of divergence stems from the fact that, as part of their expansionist agenda, Ahmadinejad and his allies are attempting to strike a balance

between rivalry with the West and a new, secular realization that Iran needs to be more economically and socially open to Europe and the U.S. to succeed. For hard-line mullahs, this represents nothing shy of accommodation with un-Islam. As such, influential clerics like Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati (who chairs the Guardian Council that approves candidates for elections) and Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami (who is an influential member of the Assembly of Experts that elects the supreme leader) have begun demanding that Ahmadinejad “fall in line” and that Mashaei (who was ousted by the clergy in April 2011) “stay silent,” letting clergymen determine foreign policy, military affairs (including nuclear policy), and internal administration. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, who was once one of the president’s spiritual mentors, has also chastised Ahmadinejad for being “ungrateful” to the Islamic revolution and to the Shiite clergymen.

In response to the rise of secular nationalism within the regime’s own ranks, fundamentalist Shiite politicians and newspaper editors have begun to rail against Ahmadinejad’s government, and the prospect of “Iran minus mullahs,” “Iranian nationalism rather than Islam,” “the Cyrus Cylinder instead of the Quran,” and “Iran for the world.” Essentially, the Shiite Islamists view “talk of nationalism as incompatible with the Islamic Revolution.”⁵⁴

The Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and the Basij militias, too, are becoming increasingly divided over the competing aspirations and goals of Shiite Islamism and Iranian nationalism. Some military and paramilitary commanders support the nationalist and international trends; others speak out against them. For example, the Sepah News Agency generally tends to side with the nationalists while another IRGC publication, *Payam-e Enqelab*, which is managed by the supreme leader’s military allies, criticizes them.⁵⁵

While snubbing the Shiite clergy, the executive branch’s quest for international prominence has gained increasing popularity among individuals who themselves do not have clerical backgrounds—including, most importantly, rank and file members of the civil service, the IRGC, and the Basij. Despite hostility still held against President Ahmadinejad for the contested 2009 elections, his nationalistic actions, as well as those undertaken by his appointees, have greatly enhanced the chief executive’s stature among the masses, who increasingly identify the mullahs with three decades of deteriorating socioeconomic standards and increasing international isolation. Compared to the mullahs and their regime, ordinary people increasingly see Ahmadinejad and his allies as the lesser evil.⁵⁶

So, the expansionist foreign agenda pursued by Iranian politicians is heightening the internal tension between Iran’s nationalist identity and honor and its now three-decade Islamist and isolationist experiment. The executive branch’s disposition to the Shiite mullahs who have shaped Iranian politics since 1979 was summed up, stating “*din* or religion should be distinct from *dowla* or state so Iran can be a world

leader again.” A salvo via a website called *Mashanews* run by Mashaei did not mince words: “Iran needs to remove the mullahs from power once for all and return it to a great civilization without the Arab-style clerics who have tainted, isolated, and destroyed the country for the past thirty-one years.”⁵⁷

Such calls represent a growing desire on the part of the executive branch to abandon the institutions of clerical rule, though not of Shiite Islamism itself. Indeed, the Principlists’ reach for world power is inspired not just by nationalism but also by its combination with Shiite messianism, as well as apocalyptic notions. Many Iranian powerbrokers hold onto the idea that Iran must regain its international stature so that it can prepare humanity for a supposed end of time when the twelfth imam—the Mahdi or savior—will reappear to ensure spiritual salvation. Such ideas are basic to Iranian religiosity since early antiquity; indeed, they entered the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions from parallel ideas in Zoroastrianism, the faith of ancient Iran.⁵⁸ Yet some worry that Ahmadinejad subscribes to violent Shiite millenarianist beliefs surrounding the Mahdi’s impending return that are allegedly linked to the Anjoman-e Hojjatiyeh or Association of God’s Proof. The Hojjatiyeh are, in fact, part of the quietist Shiite tradition rather than the activist or political one currently led by Khamenei, Jannati, and other Islamist ayatollahs. Indeed, members of the Hojjatiyeh oppose *velayat-e faqih* or guardianship of jurists institutionalized by the first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who himself spearheaded the activists’ rise to power.⁵⁹ So again, Ahmadinejad—if he is a secret member of that banned organization—has yet more reason to undermine the theocracy while expanding Iran’s global reach.

Speculation that Iran’s nuclear quest may be tied to messianism has been fueled by disclosures of simulated warhead explosions while theme music for the movie “Chariots of Fire” played in the background.⁶⁰ Earlier in his presidency, Ahmadinejad spoke of the end of the world in religious terms. Recently, under immense international pressure, and as part of his attempt to re-establish ties with the West, he has begun rephrasing those statements too. So in an interview with U.S. news media he commented, “The Mahdi or final imam will come with logic, with culture, with science ... The stories that have been disseminated around the world about extensive war, apocalyptic wars ... are false.” Not many outside Iran are convinced by his words. Yet, if true, even Ahmadinejad’s representation of a nonviolent apocalypse serves to distinguish the Principlists from the mainstream mullahs in power who maintain the notion of a conflagration at the end of time. Moreover, Iranian Foreign Ministry officials attempt to reassure their Third World counterparts that no apocalypse will be provoked by Tehran and therefore those countries should not hesitate to “explore greater cooperation” with Iran.⁶¹ The president and his supporters seem to be exploiting messianic motifs to appeal to the pious and superstitious in Iran. They are

thereby building up yet another political base not just for Ahmadinejad but also for Mashaei so perhaps he can overcome clerical opposition and then run for executive office in 2013. All the talk and piety surrounding the supposed coming of the Mahdi also permits Iranians who subscribe to Mahdism to begin sidestepping the precepts of the mullahs as unnecessary, for it is believed the messiah will establish the perfect polity and reward those who heralded his coming.

Finally, there has been no direct input from Iran's citizens on the prudence of developing atomic weapons, of furthering religious and nationalistic goals with nuclear power, and especially of spreading fundamentalism and Iranian influence to other societies. Indeed, ordinary members of the public only poorly understand the overall goals of their government's foreign policy, military plans, and ideological program. Moreover, while most Iranians regard nuclear energy as a desirable alternative to fossil fuels, it seems only a minority wish to pursue atomic weapons capability for any reason whatsoever. These internal debates have intensified as the economic toll of sanctions has mounted and the regime's popularity has tumbled.⁶²

A new realism about increasing isolation is engulfing Tehran. Even Iranian newspapers have sounded conciliatory notes toward the West regarding working toward compromise on the nuclear weapons issue: "Positive steps are being taken in the right direction toward a solution." Indeed a poll in September 2010 by the international Peace Institute revealed that 75 percent of Iranians want closer ties with the West—rather than anti-Western behaviors based on nationalism and fundamentalism.⁶³

Continued support of terrorism and militants has negative impacts on relations with Third World nations as well. Nigeria complained to the U.N. Security Council that Iran is covertly shipping weapons via the port of Lagos in violation of International sanctions. Gambia severed diplomatic relations and cooperative agreements with Iran in November 2010 once it was revealed that Iran had requested those weapons be re-routed to Banjul.⁶⁴ Senegal too downgraded its diplomatic ties with Iran, fearing the weapons were destined for rebels there. Indonesians have begun reacting negatively to increased drug trafficking—a capital offense in their country—fueled by the IRGC and its transcontinental illicit networks.⁶⁵ Brazilian authorities, detecting illegal uranium mining along its border with Venezuela, attributed this activity to Iran's quest for nuclear power and increased their watchfulness of Iranian expatriates and Iranian-funded organizations among that Latin American nation's growing Shiite communities.

As the negative impacts of Iranian expansionism become clearer, the influence it had hoped to gain through bilateral relations and multinational organizations is waning. Several hundred economic, social, and political agreements with Sub-Saharan nations remain unfulfilled. In particular, due to rising fiscal constraints and bureaucratic inefficiency, Iran has been unable to meet its development aid commitments to African nations.⁶⁶ Likewise, Iran has failed in attempts with its new-found

partners to constrict U.S. world-wide economic influence. It sought to convince other members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to peg oil's value to a basket of currencies rather than the U.S. dollar in response to U.S.-led attempts at reining in Iran's militancy, Iran even championed conversion of cash reserves into currencies other than the U.S. dollar." Yet, none of these attempts gained international traction. Moreover, economic schemes like the gas pipeline that Iranian leaders are signing with Asian nations are unlikely to materialize for decades, if at all. In the meantime, Iran, one of the world's largest exporters of crude oil, ironically has inadequate refined gasoline for its domestic consumption due to economic sanctions brought on by belligerence toward the West.⁶⁷

Despite fervent claims by ayatollahs, freedom rather than Iranian-style religious radicalism was the main factor rallying Arab citizens against their autocratic heads of state. Indeed, understanding this, even Arab Islamist groups funded by Iran have decided to bide their time rather than demand that countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan transform into Sharia-based nations.⁶⁸ Additionally, most Arabs are well aware that Iran violently and unhesitatingly suppressed its citizens' aspirations for freedom in the summer and fall of 2009 and again in February 2011. Likewise, many disgruntled Iranians believe their protests of 2009, rather than the 1979 revolution, provided inspiration for the Arab revolts of 2011. So Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt, realizing that the mantles of Khomeini and Khamenei will not serve them well either with their own people or in creating the needed working relationships with the U.S. and the E.U., have sought to distance themselves from the negative images of Iranian fundamentalism.⁶⁹

Moreover, while the ayatollahs would like to claim that the seeds of Iranian-style religiopolitical revolutions were finally germinating in Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen, dissidents at home took lessons from the success of citizens in Tunisia in driving off tyrannical leaders. Green Movement leaders like Mousavi even draw inspiration from the Arab uprisings in their attempts to oust the mullahs from power.⁷⁰

Finally, the fiscal cost of Tehran's aiding and abetting of Islamism, terrorism, and revolution has fueled much dissatisfaction among the increasingly poor, oppressed masses at home. Extending aid to other poor nations reduces hard currency reserves available to an Iranian regime already under considerable economic pressure at home after years of international sanctions. As a consequence, internal discontent has grown stronger because Iranians question why their leaders attend to the needs of others while overlooking those at home.

These negative developments are one reason why some Iranian politicians, especially the secular nationalists, are increasingly willing to challenge the fundamentalist mullahs, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, who still wish to cut off the

nation from the rest of the world. When Khamenei denounced the presence of Western, secular education and knowledge in Iranian schools and universities, Mashaei responded, “I do not believe that we should not translate foreign humanistic writings or that our students should not study them. I believe that the path of success is development and production ... The East-West struggle must end.” President Ahmadinejad went even further: “We should plan our activities according to an Iranian interpretation of Islam which is compatible with our capacities rather than choosing options that weaken us.”⁷¹ So, while the fundamentalist mullahs seek to strengthen Islam and Islamist behavior at home and abroad, the secular and nationalist Principlist faction pushes ever more vocally for strengthening Iran on the world stage even at the expense of Islam if necessary.

Such direct contradictions of the ayatollahs, and of the institutions and legacy of the Khomeinist revolution as a whole, are becoming increasingly commonplace. They are noteworthy not only because they reveal deepening rifts in the political status quo but also because they violate the deeply-entrenched Iranian notion of *tarof* or etiquette. Iran’s executive branch knows that the country is on the verge of internal socioeconomic collapse and is trying desperately to avoid that fate by reaching practical accommodations with the West while maintaining verbal bravado at home.⁷²

Realism or Ruin?

THIRTY-THREE YEARS AGO, IRANIANS FROM ALL POLITICAL AND CONFESSIONAL backgrounds joined together in a struggle to be free and to create a new society. Many had hoped to oust a monarch and build a representational, tolerant, and free society. Their aspirations were cut short when Khomeini and his cohorts seized control of the revolution and imposed a tyrannical and stridently anti-Western Islamic state that has ruled all Iranians ever since. Khomeini outmaneuvered Iranians who sought plurality, first by claiming he would fulfill their expectations and then, once they had acceded to his leadership, by brutally removing them from the political scene. Today, the Shiite Islamists who still cling to the dream of promoting Islamic revolution internationally are seeking to employ the very same Khomeinist strategy for seizing power from their very own followers in the Arab Middle East. Through the propagation of Shiite Islamism and other efforts, including the pursuit of nuclear power, Iran’s ayatollahs are attempting to set the stage for the Islamic Republic to become an important player within Arab politics; their aim is to move the region further away from representational governance and the temptations of the West and into a new world order fashioned along Islamist lines.

Yet, the challenge that Iran poses to the world is more complicated and multifaceted

than the rise of nuclear mullahs. Iranian nationalists like President Ahmadinejad believe “the world is on the threshold of major developments” and they also want Iran to play an important global role in the twenty-first century. Like the mullahs, they also seek nuclear and other powers to advance their aims. But their vision of a new world order shaped by Iran’s rising power is very different from the one on offer from the mullahs. When interviewed by American news media in September 2009, Ahmadinejad stressed the overall goal of Iranian global expansion: “For one or two countries to think they still are the ones who make the major global decisions which others should follow, well that period has come to an end.” His former Chief of Staff Mashaei has pointedly added, “What Westerners are most concerned about is Iran leading the world.” Basij Commander Mohammad Reza Naghdi claims Iran will become “the mother of all freedom-seeking revolutions in the world.”⁷³

The Islamic Republic’s appetite for power seems to keep growing. Iran seeks at most to wrest world dominance and international influence from the U.S. and at least to claim “its prominent place on the world stage” for their Shiite nation and its politicians alongside the current superpowers and their leaders.⁷⁴ For this reason, the more secular-minded individuals among the Iranian leadership are working steadily to outfox both international and national foes—with or without possessing nuclear weapons—“in the present and soon,” as Ahmadinejad has told other Iranians. Those desires even draw inspiration from the late Ayatollah Khomeini, who urged his followers “to correct the political balance” in Iran’s favor; although the nationalists are steadily rejecting the Islamist system that the first supreme leader created.⁷⁵

Yet while the regime in Tehran pursues all manner of policies to establish itself as a world leader, this very pursuit is opening up gaps between the various groups within Iran’s ruling class. For the clerics in particular, there is a growing perception that they stand to lose both Muslim principles and the Islamic Republic itself if the nationalist political elites either fail or succeed. Indeed, they have valid reasons to be concerned. The stark reality is that Iran’s economy is crumbling under the stress of U.S.-led and U.N.-imposed economic sanctions. At the same time, ordinary Iranians seeking greater political and social freedoms are brutally suppressed by regime security forces. Beyond Iran’s borders, many countries are coming to view Tehran’s global political and arms expansions as destabilizing, and they aim to resist.

Tehran’s international power play may not only collapse like a house of cards because of these internal splits, it may also bring down Iran’s economy, the mullahs’ power base—and the Islamic Republic itself. Collapse could have a silver lining, however, if it means the separation of religious ideology from the state and a retreat of activist mullahs from statecraft back to theology. After all, nationalism without both Islamism and belligerency would not threaten the world, and would facilitate Iranians coming together to rebuild their nation.

NOTES

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Messianism in the Shiite Crescent

By David Cook

EXPECTATIONS THAT THE WORLD IS SOON TO END ARE RIFE THROUGHOUT the contemporary Muslim world. Because so many Muslims today face such a dismal situation, the religious climate is primed with anticipation and popular longings for the appearance of the Mahdi, or the Muslim messiah. Books, pamphlets, and internet chat rooms are replete with stories of the Mahdi and speculation about the coming time when he will finally appear to usher in the messianic state and sweep away the modern world's suffering and injustice.

The popular belief in the coming appearance of the Mahdi is deeply rooted in both Sunni and Shiite Islamic traditions. Sunni Islam traditionally associates the Mahdi either with an official descendent of the Prophet Muhammad's family (or a dynasty claiming such descent¹), or alternatively, with a self-appointed claimant who believes that he is the best and purest of all possible Muslims in a given era. This latter messianic tendency, which reflects the essential egalitarianism of certain streams of Islam, allows for even non-Arabs to claim that they are the Mahdi. And indeed, a great many have: In the recent past, claimants have arisen in countries as diverse as Senegal, Gambia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. In our times, Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan (1996-2001), has also assumed messianic titles. Some Muslims have even wondered whether Osama bin Laden is the Mahdi, although he has made no such claim.²

Messianic upheaval in contemporary Islam has its roots in the social and political turbulence that swept across the Muslim world in 1978-79. Significantly, those years

corresponded with the Islamic year 1400, or the dawn of a new century. In many Islamic traditions, the start of a new century is seen as a time when a widespread renewal of religion should take place; moreover, it is seen as a time when the Mahdi should appear. In the words of one Hadith, “God will send to this community [the Islamic Umma] at the beginning of every century someone who will renew its religion.”³ The existence of these traditions and the fact that many still fervently believe in them helps to explain the widespread upheaval in the Muslim world almost thirty years ago. In 1979, Juhayman al-Utaybi, a Saudi militant, took over the Holy Mosque in Mecca and proclaimed his companion to be either the Mahdi or the Qahtani (another messianic claimant).⁴ In that year, there was a major messianic upheaval in northern Nigeria in the form of the Maitatsine movement, which is still a problem today,⁵ as well as Mahdi claimants in Pakistan and other countries. All of this unrest occurred against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, which provided the burgeoning radical Islamic movement with a rallying point and opportunity to coalesce around a common jihad. The jihad movement was eventually triumphant over the Soviet Union, and this victory only further fueled international jihadism’s growth—eventually spawning al-Qaeda and other groups.

Yet among all of the events that took place in the late 1970s, the Islamic Revolution in Iran stands out as the most notable, as well as the most consequential for contemporary messianism. Led by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a disparate group of Shiite Islamists, left-wing secularists, and religious conservatives overthrew a staunch American ally, the Shah of Iran. It is commonly believed that the Iranian revolution itself was an apocalyptic occurrence, happening as it did in the year 1400 *hijri*, and Khomeini skillfully used messianic passions to mobilize ordinary Iranians against the Shah. He framed the revolution, for example, as a struggle against the satanic forces of Yazid (the Shah) by the righteous forces of al-Husayn (the Iranian revolutionaries). He thus recreated in the minds of many the Battle of Karbala as it should have been (with the righteous side winning this time) at the end of the world—a messianic trope from the classical materials. Although Khomeini was careful never to explicitly identify himself as the Twelfth Imam, he did claim for himself unique honorifics (such as “Imam Khomeini”) that alluded to the Twelfth Imam, and his followers actively used messianic language and symbols to cultivate a personality cult around the revolutionary leader. While Khomeini used messianism for political ends throughout his rule, his successors, the wheeler-dealer Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and the pragmatic Mohammed Khatami (1997-2005), did not and allowed the political mahdism of the revolutionary era to wither away. However, after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s rise to power in 2005, messianism underwent a broad-based renewal in the Iranian public sphere that has also spread across the Shiite world.

The Justice of the Mahdi

WITHIN TWELVER OR IMAMI SHIISM, THE DOMINANT STREAM OF SHIISM,⁶ THE beliefs in the coming of the messiah focus entirely upon the figure of the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who tradition claims disappeared and went into occultation in 873 CE.⁷ According to the conventional accounts, the reason for the Twelfth Imam's occultation was self-protection. Both the Sunni and Shiite traditions contain a substantial amount of material about the Mahdi (although the traditions treat the messiah differently), and both traditions elaborate in great detail upon the timeline and future events that will herald his appearance. This timeline includes the various portents of the end of the world—a series of events of profound political, economic, religious, or cosmological significance that will make humankind aware that the world's end is near and compel them to prepare for the Mahdi's return. Naturally, these messianic traditions have become grist for the mill of radical preachers, who use messianic language to interpret current events in an apocalyptic fashion and thereby compel their followers to take radical action in preparation for the end of days.

In the Shiite tradition, the Mahdi figure is ultimately the final in a chain of twelve imams who are all, with the exception of Ali b. Abi Talib (the son-in-law and fourth successor to the Prophet Muhammad), descendents of Muhammad. These Shiite imams differ from those found in Sunni Islam in that they are believed to possess exclusive knowledge of the past and future, have access to interpretations of the Quran to which no one else is privy, and constitute something of a continuation of the prophetic experience of Muhammad in that they have a unique connection with God. Consequently, according to Shiites, these imams alone have the legitimate right to rule the Muslim community. Prophecies associated with these imams are considered authoritative and are included in most Shiite collections of the Hadith.⁸ In Shiism, the Twelfth Imam or Mahdi is considered to be present in this world, although he is not in immediate contact with humanity and will remain hidden until his final return.

First among the major omens connected with the belief in the Mahdi's imminent return is the appearance of his apocalyptic opponent, the Sufyani. Mainstream tradition tells that the Sufyani will be a tyrannical Arab Muslim ruler who will hail from the region of Syria and who will brutally oppress the Shiite peoples. Before the 2003 collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, many messianic writers in both the Sunni and Shiite traditions identified Saddam Hussein as the Sufyani. Since 2004, however, there has been a tendency to gloss over the classical belief in the

Sufyani's Syrian-Muslim identity and to identify him instead with the United States (as many Iraqis hold the U.S. responsible for the slaughters in their country.) Another recent trend within Shiite messianism has been to identify the Sufyani with prominent Sunni radicals such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (killed June 2006), who was virulently anti-Shiite. From the perspective of the classical sources, Zarqawi would have indeed been an excellent candidate, because his hometown in Jordan is extremely close to where the Sufyani is supposed to come from.⁹

Classical messianic literature says that the Sufyani's appearance will occur either together with or in close connection to Byzantine (al-Rum) invasions of the Muslim world, as the Byzantines are expected to conquer the northern areas of Syria and Iraq. It is widely accepted that U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 fulfilled these predictions, and both Sunni and Shiite radicals routinely play upon these popular beliefs as part of their propaganda efforts to stir-up hostility toward American forces.¹⁰ The Muslim world, according to the predictions, will be attacked on all sides. At this particular junction, the classical sources say the Mahdi will appear, either in the region of Mecca and Medina (associated with the time of the hajj pilgrimage) or in the region of Khorasan (eastern Iran and Afghanistan). Alternative places associated with the Mahdi are his future capital of Kufa (in southern Iraq) and the messianic pilgrimage site of Jamkaran (near Qom in Iran), where he is traditionally believed to be located or at least accessible.¹¹

In the popular Shiite view, the Mahdi is a vengeful figure who will first take vengeance upon those Sunni Muslims who have opposed the rights of the family of the Prophet Muhammad to rule and who will then establish a messianic state that will encompass the world.¹² The classical sources are unclear about whether or not the Mahdi will convert humankind to Islam. What the sources do make clear is that the Mahdi will be especially ruthless toward existing Islamic religious establishments: he will destroy mosques because they have become over-adorned and not true places of worship, and he will kill the *ulama*, or religious scholars, because they have failed to establish a just and properly Islamic order.¹³ In every way, the appearance of the Mahdi will cause a sharp and total break with existing Islamic norms.

The popular attraction and appeal of messianic teachings is doubtlessly connected to the belief that the Mahdi's return will usher in revolutionary social and political change. One of the core Hadith concerning the Mahdi and recognized by both Sunni and Shiite authors claims that he "will fill the earth with justice and righteousness just as it has been filled with injustice and unrighteousness."¹⁴ The foundation of this messianic state and the establishment of worldly justice is one reason why people hope for the Mahdi's coming. Because Shiites generally see themselves as the *mustadafin fi al-ard* (the downtrodden of the earth, cf. Quran 8:26) and have a long history of persecution at the hands of Sunnis, the longing for total revolution and

the messianic state within Shiism in particular has often been quite intense. This fact is evident in the highly personal literature and letters dedicated to the Mahdi that may be found in contemporary Iran and Lebanon, as well as in Shiite communities worldwide.¹⁵

The Dajjal, or the Antichrist, is another key figure in Muslim apocalyptic literature. Since the Dajjal is said to be a Jew, contemporary Sunni writers often use this figure to inject anti-Semitic conspiracy thinking into mainstream apocalyptic writings.¹⁶ The Dajjal was virtually absent in traditional Shiite writings, although nowadays the figure is gaining more and more prominence in contemporary Shiite apocalyptic materials. Classically, the stories concerning the figure of the Mahdi and his opponent the Sufyani were much more important among Shiites. However, the fact that the Sufyani does not represent an absolute demonic evil in the same way that the Dajjal does has probably created a need among contemporary Shiite radicals to re-focus Shiite apocalyptic discourse upon the latter. Indeed, Dajjal stories have become loci for demonizing the West as a whole, which is routinely portrayed as the embodiment of the Antichrist. Furthermore, anti-Semitic references to the Dajjal regularly appear today in Shiite apocalyptic literature; only a few years ago such references were nonexistent.¹⁷

Historically, it was not in the interests of the Shiite religious leadership, or the *hawza*, to encourage apocalyptic expectations. The religious authorities instead sought to manage popular mahdism by focusing messianic attentions toward the distant future rather than upon the immediate future. A strong and influential religious leadership could accomplish this, because traditionally the return of the Mahdi was never associated with any actual dates. Speculation about the Mahdi's return, when it did arise, was quickly diverted by the *hawza* onto more practical matters, including personal spiritual renewal or the improvement of society. However, when the authority of the *hawza* was weakened, popular messianic longings often resurfaced. This occurred during the beginnings of the Babi or Bahai movement in the 1840s. Nowadays, apocalyptic beliefs within the Shiite world are undergoing enormous changes and revival. Messianism is slipping free of the control of the religious establishment, and it is increasingly used by lay preachers to interpret current events and to compel their followers to take action—often according to a radical agenda. In significant ways, these changes within Shiite messianism have mimicked similar patterns of change that have occurred within Sunni Islam and among some Christian evangelical movements in the contemporary era. These changes have had important ramifications for Shiite social and political life.

Iran, Iraq and Lebanon

IN THE PERIOD BEFORE THE MUSLIM MESSIAH'S ULTIMATE RETURN AND THE end of days, Islamic messianic traditions hold that the Mahdi's influence is manifest in various ways within the physical world. This perception of the Mahdi's influence in the world has been a constant feature of the Shiite religious landscape ever since his greater occultation in 941 CE. That event led to the growth of vast and often deeply personal literature concerning revelations, dreams, healings, visions, and other occurrences all attributed to the Mahdi's personal intervention.

Today, the three largest Shiite populations of Iran, Iraq and Lebanon are experiencing a dramatic transformation in the nature and scope of messianic expectation. In the past, these societies often passively accepted the teachings of religious authorities about the Mahdi, which tended to be conservative and exercised restraint over popular messianic hopes and longings. However, because of the breakdown of traditional religious authorities and the related rise of rogue and more radical clerics, there is today growing anticipation among the wider public that the Mahdi's return is imminent. This has led to the rapid spread of now widely-available literature about predictions and prophecies concerning the messiah and his imminent appearance. These writings describe the Mahdi's coming in great detail, including the manner in which he will overturn the modern order and establish the just state, the time and place in which he will appear, and the methods by which he will take vengeance upon his enemies. While Shiite Islam has always possessed an elaborate literature concerning the Mahdi, never before has this literature been as copious, publicly available, detailed, or socially explosive (in terms of its stress on the imminence of the Mahdi's return) as it is today.

Hezbollah provides a good example of this dramatic attitudinal change in messianic expectation. This revolutionary Shiite organization, which was originally created to fight the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon (1982-2000), had at its inception been rather secular and even Marxist in its ideological orientation and use of terminology and symbolism. While Hezbollah has routinely utilized tropes that are traditionally Shiite (for example, the revered martyr Husayn is frequently utilized by Hezbollah as a revolutionary model to be emulated), the movement's ideologues have conventionally placed little emphasis on the revelation of the Mahdi. This has definitely changed since approximately 2004, when a flood of books about the Mahdi began to spring from the popular presses of Beirut. These books have aimed to not only introduce classical prophecies about the Mahdi to ever-wider audiences, but have also provided religiously-charged interpretations of contemporary events in

terms of the Mahdi's imminent return designed to compel readers to take action. For example, prior to 2000, there were virtually no references to the Mahdi's appearance in Hezbollah's resistance literature concerning Israel. Yet with the 2006 campaign against Israel, Hezbollah published a record of the "miraculous occurrences" that took place during the war. The Mahdi is featured prominently in this account, such as in the following anecdote:

One of us began to pray the ordained prayer during the mid-day, when a man giving off rays of light appeared to him. The fighter said to him in surprise and fear, "Who are you? How did you get here?" The man said: "I am the Imam al-Hujja [a messianic title], your master, I appear by the permission of God to our supporters whenever I wish and in whatever place, and I would like to speak with you." He said: "My master, I am not alone, but there are other fighters in position."

So the man guided the Mahdi to the other fighters. "Just at that moment the Zionists approached with their tanks and bulldozers" and when Israeli missiles began to rain towards the three fighters, the Mahdi pointed with his hand, and one of the missiles fell upon an Israeli tank instead. Then the three fighters began to attack the other tanks, and one of them succeeded in firing an RPG right at it, and destroyed it. "Then the Imam called out to the fighters, saying to them: 'Now, retreat' and the fighters retreated, but they were victorious with his divine help."¹⁸

Of course, the appeal of militant mahdism is not confined to Lebanon's Hezbollah exclusively. In contemporary Iraq, there is even more opportunity for radical Shiite elements of the Mahdist movement to express themselves—far greater, in fact, than there is in neighboring Iran. This is a consequence of both the Iranian regime's control over religion and also of the general breakdown in social order in Iraq since the fall of the Saddam regime. Many Iraqis harbor deep suspicions of U.S. intentions in their country, and there are frequent assertions in the apocalyptic literature produced in Iraq that state that the purpose of the U.S.-led invasion was to initiate an apocalyptic war—in this case, to find the Mahdi and to kill him.¹⁹ Members of Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army likely also share this view, believing that their mission is either literally to defend the Mahdi from American forces or figuratively to defend the Shiite community.²⁰

Even more extremist mahdist tendencies in Iraq have appeared in the form of

movements like the Soldiers of Heaven, which was exposed in January 2007. Although a great deal is still unclear about this group's origins and make-up, it was an ecumenical apocalyptic group that adhered to the idea that Iraq's ulama were the source of all of the country's problems and that they must be killed. Although it is possible to find beliefs that oblige violence against religious scholars in apocalyptic literature, there are no other messianic groups in Islamic history that actually attempted to carry them out. The figure behind the Soldiers of Heaven revolt was a charismatic leader named Ahmad al-Hassani. Hasani had taken for himself the title of al-Yamani, a minor forerunning messianic figure said to oppose the Sufyani in battle. His group numbered several thousands, spanned the Shiite-Sunni divide, and preached the destruction of the religious elite.²¹ Although a joint U.S.-Iraqi operation suppressed the Soldiers of Heaven in a January, 2007 battle that left hundreds dead, their doctrines raise interesting questions concerning the direction that such apocalyptic beliefs could take in the future. The ability of the Soldiers of Heaven to bridge the sectarian gap was striking—especially in a country as divided as Iraq. While many analysts have noted how ideological differences often present difficulties for radical Shiites and Sunnis to work together, belief in the apocalypse is one thing they share and could thus plausibly provide grounds for a common agenda in the future.

Meanwhile, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the primary focus of popular messianic expectations is the shrine at Jamkaran (located a short distance away from Qom), where the Mahdi is said to dwell. With the strong backing of President Ahmadinejad, the Jamkaran mosque has been undergoing a complete renovation and expansion in recent times. Additionally, the mosque has been printing an enormous volume of publications concerning the Mahdi and apocalyptic events. The ubiquity and tenor of these publications helps to illuminate the profound transformation of messianic expectation within Iran in recent years.²² This transformation has moved popular expectation away from the future-oriented, more speculative range of traditional, narrative forms of messianism (hitherto the most common content of apocalyptic Shiite materials) and into a more imminent and practical focus that permits much greater exegetical latitude. Thus, instead of merely relating to tradition and classical sources, contemporary messianic exegesis seeks to relate to current world events (in some respects, this is similar to the contemporary Biblical messianism of evangelical preacher Hal Lindsey.) These publications contain popular accounts similar to those found in classical sources of personal visitations with the Mahdi during which he miraculously heals ordinary people. But they also provide religiously-charged interpretations of current events such as the Iraq War and Hezbollah's struggle with Israel, and they speak of the Mahdi's imminent return and the looming advent of the messianic state.

The celebration of militancy and martyrdom, a key feature in the Islamic Republic's

propaganda, is also deeply connected with the Mahdi. Although Iran has not fought a major war since the devastating Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), popular histories of the war retroactively describe Mahdi appearances and interventions during that time. The books sold at Jamkaran give many examples of the Mahdi personally intervening as the initiator of martyrdom attacks during the Iran-Iraq War.²³ Because both religious radicals and more secular nationalists strongly supported the war and Iran's struggle against the Saddam regime, the fact that the Mahdi is said to have played a role in the struggle is significant—it is designed to promote unity across the regime. In the contemporary era, President Ahmadinejad has aggressively promoted the cult of the Mahdi, and appealing to popular messianic longings and expectations has been a key feature of his political rule both domestically and internationally.

The President and the Mahdi

SINCE THE CLOSE OF THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA AND ESPECIALLY SINCE THE END of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, Iran's leaders have generally tended to behave more pragmatically. For most of the late 1980s and the whole of the 1990s, the language of worldwide Islamic revolution was reduced to a minimum, and the legacy of Khomeini, who clearly sought to bring revolution to the whole Muslim world, was ignored. That changed with Ahmadinejad's election in the summer of 2005, which either resulted from or catalyzed the apocalyptic upheaval in the Shiite world. Most probably this upheaval was brought about by a number of factors, including the fact that after the 2003 overthrow of the Saddam regime the Shiite holy places of Iraq were once again returned to Shiite control and also because the Shiite presence and *dawa* activities have become more aggressive in recent years throughout the Muslim world (including missions in Africa, Indonesia, and elsewhere).

In sharp contrast with his immediate predecessors, Ahmadinejad has emphasized his own beliefs in the Mahdi's imminence and has even suggested that he will play a personal role in the coming of the Mahdi. For example, in a now notorious speech at the United Nations on September 17, 2005, Ahmadinejad said,

From the beginning of time, humanity has longed for the day when justice, peace, equality and compassion envelop the world. All of us can contribute to the establishment of such a world. When that day comes, the ultimate promise of all Divine religions will be fulfilled with the emergence of a perfect human being who is heir to all prophets and pious men. He will lead the world to justice and absolute peace...O mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence

of your last repository, the promised one, that perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace.²⁴

Although the phrases used in this speech are not substantially different from those voiced commonly by Iranian politicians at the U.N., the end prayer calling on the messiah to hasten his appearance is unique and illustrates the sense of immediacy that Ahmadinejad frequently seeks to convey when speaking about the Mahdi's appearance. According to Ahmadinejad's own account, as he made this call to the Lord he was bathed in a green light, which he took as a sign that the Mahdi himself was blessing the speech.²⁵

Interestingly, Ahmadinejad's later speech at the U.N. on September 19, 2006 also focused upon messianic themes. He frequently spoke about humankind's obligation to hasten the foundation of a just state:

We are all members of the international community and we are all entitled to insist on the creation of a climate of compassion, love and justice...Together, we can eradicate the roots of bitter maladies and afflictions, and instead, through the promotion of universal and lasting values such as ethics, spirituality and justice, allow our nations to taste the sweetness of a better future...Peoples, driven by their divine nature, intrinsically seek Good, Virtue, Perfection and Beauty. Relying on our peoples, we can take giant steps towards reform and pave the road for human perfection. Whether we like it or not, justice, peace and virtue will sooner or later prevail in the world with the will of Almighty God. It is imperative, and also desirable, that we too contribute to the promotion of justice and virtue.²⁶

Ahmadinejad concluded by directly appealing to popular longings for the world's "real savior." Although he does not mention the Mahdi by name, there is little doubt that the Iranian president has him in mind:

I emphatically declare that today's world, more than ever before, longs for just and righteous people with love for all humanity; and above all longs for the perfect righteous human being and the real savior who has been promised to all peoples and who will establish justice, peace and brotherhood on the planet.²⁷

These types of calls set Ahmadinejad apart not only from his immediate political predecessors but also from the Iranian religious elite who, as a matter of faith, concede

that the Mahdi's appearance is desirable but who also do not encourage these types of fervent calls. Ahmadinejad is a calculative and deliberate politician, and it would be a mistake to assume that his appeals to messianism are a sign of lunacy or a result of his religious belief exclusively. Instead, by appealing to the Mahdi, an authority higher than the clerics, Ahmadinejad hopes to negate the influence of some of his country's religious elite and to promote a more vigorous spread of Iranian Islamist ideology throughout the Muslim world. Messianism thus permits the Iranian president an opening to accomplish his goals within an accepted Shiite framework.

Messianic Futures

MESSIANISM IS AN IMPORTANT DRIVER OF POLITICAL LIFE IN THE SHIITE WORLD whose power is too often underestimated and too easily misunderstood by outsiders. One obvious and legitimate source of deep concern for outsiders has been the potential combination of activist Shiite messianism and the Iranian nuclear program.²⁸ But there are deeper issues as well.

It has become increasingly likely that a messianic claimant will arise in the near future to send shockwaves across the Shiite world. Apocalyptic literature and other materials are currently ubiquitous in both Sunni and the Shiite societies, and belief in the Mahdi's imminent return is now gaining wider audiences. A combination of factors—the approach of the *hijri* year 1500 (approximately 2076 CE), as well as the pent-up frustration, despair and sense of humiliation that is so common in the contemporary Muslim world—could also contribute to an upsurge in popular messianism. Historically, such eruptions were infrequent because of the tight grip that the Shiite religious hierarchy maintained over messianic belief. However, recent revolts—most notably the Soldiers of Heaven in Iraq, the virulently anti-ulama messianic movement—demonstrate that the influence of traditional authorities over messianism has broken down in today's generally volatile Shiite religious landscape. Moreover, it is also possible that a Shiite messianic movement could quickly transcend the Sunni-Shiite divide in much the same way that radical Shiite groups have recently gained prestige among Sunnis (for example, Hezbollah after its various victories) and have prompted popular conversions to Shiism.²⁹

Dating the appearance of the Mahdi should be a factor in the appearance of a messianic claimant. For instance, the 1000-year anniversary of the Mahdi's occultation was a time of enormous messianic disturbance that ultimately led to the emergence of the Bahai faith (1844-50). The 1200th anniversary of the occultation will occur in approximately 2039, and given the importance of the holy number of 12 in Shiism, the twelfth century after the occultation could also become a locus of

messianic aspirations. In one scenario, either a messianic claimant could appear or, more likely, one or several movements hoping to “purify” the Muslim world (or the entire world) in preparation for the Mahdi’s imminent revelation could develop. Such movements would likely be quite violent; if they took control of a state, they could conceivably ignite a regional conflict.

It should be noted that most of the violence described inside the Shiite apocalyptic literature targets Sunnis or the Shiite religious establishment and not non-Muslims. However, this fact does not necessarily mean that future apocalyptic movements would confine their violence simply to these stated targets. Their ultimate goal is the establishment of a messianic state, and their reason for attacking the ulama in particular derives from their belief that the existing religious authorities are unjust and prevent the creation of a just state. In principle, any other force seen as obstructing the establishment of the messianic state could quickly become a target for violent mahdist movements.

Religious belief has a major impact upon populations in politically consequential countries worldwide. We learned this, at great cost, during the Islamic Revolution in Iran and then again on September 11, 2001. Shiite messianic movements are dangerous and will probably exact a heavy toll in lives in coming years until either the violence associated with them runs its course or, more hopefully, until the movements themselves embrace a more constructive vision for a just and equitable future.

NOTES

1. Only two remain: the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and the ruling Alawite family of Morocco; both have had messianic speculation associated with them.
2. See Timothy R. Furnish, “Bin Ladin: The Man who would be Mahdi,” *Middle East Quarterly* Spring, 2002, at <http://www.meforum.org/article/159> for a summary of the evidence for the idea that he has claimed to be the Mahdi.
3. Abu Daud al-Sijistani, *Sunan* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1988), iv, pp. 106-107 (no. 4291).
4. See J. Ketchichian, “Islamic Revivalism in Saudi Arabia.” *Muslim World* Vol. 80 (1990), pp. 1-16.
5. Roman Lomeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), chapter 4.
6. There are many smaller Shiite groups, such as the Seveners (Ismailis) and many others, but they are not the focus of this paper.
7. The period between 873 and 941 is called the Lesser Occultation, when the Mahdi was periodically in contact with the Shiite community; after 941 the Greater Occultation is characterized by a more distant Mahdi.

8. For lists of these see Muhsin Aqil, *al-Imam al-Mahdi wa-alamat zuhur ind al-Imam Jafar al-Sadiq* (Beirut: Dar al-Mahajja al-Bayda, 2009).
9. Classically, the Sufyani is supposed to come from Wadi al-Yabis, in the northern section of Jordan, very close to Zarqawi's hometown of al-Zarqa; see Abd Muhammad Hasan, *Iqtaraba al-zuhur* (Beirut: Dar al-Mahajja al-Bayda, 2006), pp. 125, 133 for this identification, which is quite widespread on the internet too.
10. See my "Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: The Apocalyptic Theorist and the Apocalyptic Practitioner," in David Marno (ed.), *The Apocalyptic Impulse* (forthcoming).
11. Information about the cult of Jamkaran is available at <http://www.jamkaran.info/>; and further from a historical point of view at http://www.jafariyanews.com/oct2k2/22_jamkran.htm.
12. On his government, see Ayatollah Makarim al-Shirazi, *Hukumat asr al-zuhur* (Beirut: Dar Jawad al-Aimma, 2009); and Shaykh Kazim al-Misbah, *Dawlat al-Imam al-Mahdi wa-asr al-zuhur* (Beirut: Dar al-Katib al-Arabi, 2007).
13. See my *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), pp. 232-236 for full references.
14. *Ibid.* pp. 137ff.
15. See Muhammad Taqi Akbarnejad (ed.), *Namha-yi nawjavanan bih Imam-i Zaman* (Jamkaran: Masjid-i Muqaddas-i Jamkaran, 1385/2004); *Namha-yi javanan bih Imam-i Zaman* (Jamkaran: Masjid-i Muqaddas-i Jamkaran, 1385/2004); *Namha-yi dukhtaran bih Imam-i Zaman*. (Jamkaran: Masjid-i Muqaddas-i Jamkaran, 1385/2004).
16. Shaykh Majid al-Saigh, *Shayatin ma qabla zuhur al-Imam al-Mahdi* (Beirut: Muassasat al-Balagh, 2009), pp. 146-178.
17. E.g., Al-Sayyid Husayn Hijazi, *Istaiddu fa-inna al-zuhur qarib* (Beirut: Dar al-Mahajja al-Bayda, 2006), pp. 163-167.
18. Majid Nasir al-Zabidi, *Karamat al-wad al-sadiq: tawthiq al-nasr al-ilahi li-l-muqawama al-Islamiyya fi Lubnan* (Beirut: Dar al-Mahajja al-Bayda, 2007), pp. 191-192.
19. Al-Hijazi, pp. 52-53.
20. http://www.daralhayat.com/arab_news/levant_news/02-2007/Item-20070201-7ede14af-c0a8-10ed-0133-5b8615f60ecd/story.html.
21. <http://www.mideastwire.com/> (from February 1, 2007).
22. I visited Qom during June 2007 and collected a total of 48 books and pamphlets there on the Mahdi and apocalyptic events. I also collected a further 25 books published elsewhere in Iran.
23. See Muhammad Riza Ramadannejad, *Inayat-i Imam-i Zaman dar hasht-i sal-i difa-i muqaddas* (Qom: Intisharat-i Asr, 2006).
24. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2005/iran-050918-irna02.htm>.
25. <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1553027/posts>.
26. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6107339>.
27. *Ibid.*
28. One should note, however, that the Iranian nuclear program preceded the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, and constitutes just one of the elements garnering support for him. Many Iranian secularists and nationalists support Ahmadinejad's push for the nuclear program while at the same time either fearing or despising his messianic ideals, and there is some evidence that senior *ulama* feel the same way.
29. This is documented mostly in outlying regions of the Muslim world (West Africa and Indonesia), but also in the Middle East and South Asia.

Europe and Turkey Drift Apart

By Onur Sazak

NEARLY EIGHT YEARS AGO, TURKEY'S PRIME MINISTER RECEP Tayip Erdogan and his Italian counterpart Silvio Berlusconi stood side-by-side in a crowded hall in Istanbul as they watched the prime minister's son and future daughter-in-law exchange wedding vows. A few months later, Erdogan repeated the gesture by inviting Kostas Karamanlis, then Greece's Prime Minister, to witness his daughter's wedding. Berlusconi's and Karamanlis' attendance at both weddings—and not simply as guests, but as witnesses—sent strong signals about Turkey's chances of becoming a full-fledged member of the European Union (E.U.). To many in Turkey, such high-level representation from two E.U. countries signaled that the E.U. as a whole was finally warming up to the idea that Turkey was a part of Europe. And indeed, much of the credit for these developments belonged to Prime Minister Erdogan's personal diplomacy and to the proactive stance that his Justice and Development Party (AKP) had taken on Turkey's E.U. candidacy ever since AKP's landslide victory in the 2002 elections. AKP's leadership, which included sweeping reforms making Turkey one of the world's fastest growing economies, seemed to have finally paid off at the European Council summit on December 16, 2004; shortly after the summit, in October 2005, E.U. leaders agreed to start the accession negotiations.¹

That was then. In the course of the last eight years, Ankara's relations with the core E.U. members have steadily deteriorated, and public support within Turkey for accession to the E.U. has taken a steep plunge. At the start of the accession talks, nearly 85 percent of Turkish people supported Turkey's E.U. membership; today, that number has declined to less than 40 percent.² The personal relationships between Turkish leaders and the leaders of E.U. countries that have previously been favorable to Turkish accession

have also weakened. At the beginning of 2011, during a ceremony to launch the Universiade winter games in Turkey, Prime Minister George Papandreu of Greece and Erdogan uttered harsh criticism at each other and blamed one another for the lack of resolution on the Cyprus issue.³ A few days later, Egemen Bagis, the Chief Negotiator and Minister of E.U. Affairs, challenged the E.U. to pull the plug on the negotiations.⁴

What Went Wrong?

A NUMBER OF EXPLANATIONS HAVE BEEN OFFERED ON THE DETERIORATING relations between Turkey and the European Union as well as the connected matter of the Turkish peoples' waning enthusiasm for joining the European Union. The most popular explanation centers on the fundamentally new orientation that Turkish domestic and especially foreign policy has taken since AKP's election victory in 2007. This new direction has generated widespread distrust of Turkey and its commitment to liberal democracy in the West. Often referred to as the "axis shift," Turkey's new foreign policy under AKP has involved warming relations with many of the oppressive and terrorism-supporting regimes in its neighborhood, including the Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria. Some of these countries were once Ottoman colonies, and they had carried on decades of serious disputes with the Europe-oriented Turkish Republic that emerged in 1923 after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Nowadays, a prevalent view in the Middle East is that AKP and Turkey's conservative Muslim elites have forsaken modern Turkey's Western-orientation and aligned the republic instead with its Muslim neighbors in the East in a bid to resurrect the old empire. The frequent visits to Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the Gulf States by high-level Turkish government officials, as well as the new strategic framework and visa agreements that Ankara has signed with each of these countries, only serve to reinforce this notion.

Turkey's improving relations and its dramatically enlarged commercial activity with the Islamic Republic of Iran have been especially alarming to the West, which have sought to diplomatically isolate the Islamic Republic because of its support for terrorism and suspicions over its nuclear program. Turkey, meanwhile, has sought to use its new relations with Iran to position itself as a bridge between Europe and the pariah state. In January 2011, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany—also known as "P5+1"—met with the Iranian delegation in Istanbul to discuss Iran's nuclear program upon Turkey's invitation. The talks were concluded without a substantive outcome. In a press conference shortly after the first closed-door session, Catherine Ashton, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, expressed disappointment in

Iran's position. "This was not the conclusion I had hoped for," Ashton said. "We had hoped to embark on a discussion of practical ways forward, and have made every effort to make that happen."⁵

The Istanbul talks were intended to build confidence between the parties and to achieve an agreement that Iran would trade some of its low-enriched uranium for nuclear fuel for Tehran's Research Reactor. Turkey and Brazil were the chief proponents of this plan. In 2010, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had traveled to Tehran with his Brazilian counterpart to negotiate a deal that would entail Iran storing its spent nuclear fuel in Turkey in exchange for enriched uranium to be used for nuclear medicine and research facilities. The deal failed when the United States and the other involved parties rejected the amount Tehran agreed to transfer to Turkey. The West contended that the amount the Iranian government agreed to release still left sufficient enriched uranium to put together a nuclear weapon. Turkey subsequently protested the West's decision to use its veto at the UN Security Council meeting in June 2010 on the sanctions proposed for Iran.

Another widely shared explanation for the current worsening relations between the E.U. and Turkey is Europe's growing skepticism about Turkey's commitment to European values. The core group of E.U. states, led by Germany and France, are not as optimistic as the other members about Turkey's desire to comply with E.U. standards and liberal democratic principles. In November 2010, the official progress report once again relayed the commission's concern over Turkey's lack of progress in meeting the fundamental *acquis* criteria. It featured, for instance, an ardent criticism of Ankara for the lack of action toward the peaceful resolution of the Cyprus issue. Furthermore, it signaled that the eight key chapters, including energy and foreign relations, are likely to remain blocked unless the government moves forward on the resolution of the Cyprus issue.

More recently, a series of raids by Turkish police on newspapers and the arrests of journalists who had been critical of the AKP government have resulted in a strain of harsh criticism by Brussels. In March 2011, the European Parliament issued an acerbic criticism of the arrests, condemning in particular the apprehension of Nedim Sener, a trustworthy investigative journalist and the recipient of PEN International's Freedom of Expression Award, for alleged links with an illegal organization intending to topple the government. The European Parliament said it was closely following the cases of Nedim Sener and his colleague Ahmet Sık, as well as other journalists facing police or judicial harrassment, and urged Turkish government to respect the freedom of press.

Erdogan subsequently rejected the Parliament's criticism, claiming the arrests had nothing to do with freedom of press. According to the prime minister, the journalists were behind bars not because of what they had written or reported, but

because of their ties to an illegal terrorist organization.⁶ He told the press that the European Parliament's report was "unbalanced" and that his government need not do anything about it. "Their duty is to prepare the report, and ours is to go our own way," Erdogan said.⁷

Because of growing concerns over Turkey's actual commitment to European principles, Germany and France have staunchly opposed Turkey's admission to the E.U. The coalition led by Germany and France has consistently and unambiguously voiced its concerns over Turkey's human rights record and its majority Muslim population. Although European leaders do not express it openly, Europe's experience with its own Muslim immigrant populations reinforces its fear of admitting a large Muslim country to the union. Turkey, if admitted, would have significant political influence over major E.U. decisions on everything from economic to foreign policy. As such, Turkey's warming relations with the unstable and often oppressive Muslim regimes to its East and South, as well as the increasing suspicion in the West of creeping Islamization within Turkey itself, are important causes of concern for the European capitals.⁸

As an alternative to full Turkish membership in the E.U., France and Germany have suggested that the E.U. and Turkey form a "privileged partnership"—a scheme that would neither completely break the ties between the E.U. and Turkey nor grant the latter the full rights of an E.U. member. During a trip to Turkey in late February 2011, French President Nicolas Sarkozy did not shy away from reaffirming his opposition to Turkey's accession to the E.U. Visiting Turkey not as a head of state, but as the holder of the rotating presidency of the G20, Sarkozy also remarked that Turkey as "a strong country at the crossroads of the East and West, does not need to join the European Union."⁹ When Sarkozy stated all of this, he was standing only inches apart from his Turkish counterpart, President Abdullah Gul, at a joint press conference. Turkish leaders and public opinion widely interpreted Sarkozy's insistence on visiting Turkey not as French President and his brief stay in Turkey—less than six hours—as signs of the E.U.'s waning interest in the admission of Turkey. Sarkozy tried in vain to alleviate the Turkish side's concern by underlining that the close partnership between the E.U. and Turkey will continue regardless of Turkey's entry into the European Union. He promised as well "boundless cooperation" on Turkish efforts in procuring nuclear technology.¹⁰ Sarkozy also said, "Between accession and [special] partnership, which Turkey says it does not accept, there is a path of equilibrium that we can find."¹¹

The German Chancellor Angela Merkel has joined Sarkozy on more than one occasion in an effort to persuade Turkey to settle for a privileged partnership with the E.U.—and not full membership. However, Merkel's rhetoric over Turkey has tended to be comparably softer than that of France's president. This is likely because of her

conservative party's Social Democratic coalition partner and also due to worries that appearing to be too opposed to Turkey's belonging to the E.U. might put-off the nearly three million Turkish immigrants living in Germany. Nonetheless, her recent pronouncement on "the failure of multicultural society in Germany" is widely seen in Turkey and elsewhere as a subtle expression of Merkel's, and her Christian Democratic Party's, stalwart resistance to Turkey's entry.¹² Similarly, during the referenda for the E.U. constitution in 2005, the "no" vote cast by French and Dutch majorities also represented popular resentment in each country toward an E.U. enlargement that would include Turkey.¹³

Such statements and demonstrations often provoke strong reactions from Turkish leaders, accompanied by assurances that Turkey is committed to fully joining the E.U. For example, following Sarkozy's visit last February, President Gul reaffirmed Turkey's commitment to membership and called on the E.U. to honor its promise. "We expect the entire E.U. to keep the promise they made," Gul said, "and give us the opportunity to complete the process successfully." He added that the referendum on Turkish accession that France might potentially hold in the future would not bother Ankara, underscoring that "artificial obstructions must not hinder" Turkey's potential to join.¹⁴ What the president meant here was that if the French people voted against the Turkish accession, he would respect their decision. However, he is against some European leaders' efforts to change the negotiation terms or to come up with alternatives to the full membership, such as the "privileged partnership."

Shortly after Gul's remarks, in an interview with a German newspaper prior to his trip to Germany in February, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan accused the E.U. countries of discriminating against Turkey. "The course of the membership creates an impression of discrimination. We are treated the same as countries that do not have any E.U. perspective," Erdogan charged. He also pointed to the strict visa policy to which Turkish citizens are subjected. "Although E.U. member countries impose strict visa procedures on Turkey," Erdogan complained, "citizens of Balkan countries who even do not have membership status are exempted from visa requirements." The Turkish Prime Minister criticized as well the countries mentioned earlier for blocking the negotiations on the remaining eighteen chapters for political reasons. In Erdogan's view, there can be little progress on Turkey's E.U. entry for as long as certain E.U. members choose to continue to barricade from rather than encourage Turkey to join.¹⁵

On the same trip, Erdogan repeated his call on the Turks living in Germany not to assimilate. "You must integrate," Erdogan decreed, "but I am against assimilation ... no one may ignore the rights of minorities." "Our children must learn German, but they must learn Turkish first," added the Turkish Prime Minister. While he has been resistant to assimilation and the dilution of Turkish identity in Europe, Erdogan seems to be fine with Turks becoming doctors, professors and politicians in

Germany. Indeed, in his thinking, a Turkish immigrant should learn German and integrate only for the purpose of reaching these professional goals.¹⁶ Erdogan had made similar provocative remarks three years earlier, addressing hundreds of Turkish people at a joint press event with Chancellor Merkel. The prime minister had proclaimed to a large gathering of Turkish nationals in Cologne in March 2008, “assimilation is tantamount to a crime against humanity.”¹⁷ Erdogan’s remarks at the time reflected his own convictions about the integration of minorities into mainstream European societies and coincided with an era of heated internal debate in Europe on integration versus assimilation. To some Europeans, the prime minister’s remarks represented unwelcome meddling in a sensitive debate on Europe’s future, and this has only further soured E.U.-Turkey relations.

Is Europe to Blame?

ERDOGAN’S ACCUSATIONS ABOUT EUROPEAN BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION ARE increasingly resonate with the Turkish public. A growing cohort of intellectuals and opinion leaders from across the political spectrum argue that the E.U. has not been honest with Turkey ever since the start of accession talks. Academics, journalists, pundits, and a diverse group of other representatives of Turkey’s emerging civil society, many of them of liberal persuasion, routinely draw comparisons between Turkey and some of the E.U.’s newest members, such as Bulgaria and Romania. They point out that Turkey is more democratic and economically successful than these former Soviet states that are now E.U. members. And understandably, they often come to the conclusion that the reason the E.U. drags its feet when it comes to Turkey joining has very little to do with democracy and economic performance, but that it has much to do with Turkey’s Muslim identity.¹⁸

An outside perspective, however, demonstrates that this comparison between Turkey and its non-Muslim neighbors who recently joined the European Union is not entirely accurate. A comprehensive investigation in *The Economist* reveals that in spite of all its strength, the Turkish economy still trails far behind the economies of the E.U.’s youngest members. *The Economist* points out that Turkey ranks below Russia, Albania and Romania on the UN Development Program’s human-development index.¹⁹ Furthermore, even though inflation has declined significantly in the last decade, it remains a serious factor of instability in Turkey. Worse, unemployment—especially among the young and women—is extremely high by E.U. standards, and there has been little improvement in eradicating corruption. According to the corruption rankings of Transparency International, a Berlin-based NGO that monitors the trends of corruption in the world, Turkey is behind most E.U. countries, ranking

56, with a score of 4.4 out of 10 (on a scale from ten to zero—ten being the most transparent).²⁰ While Turkey has better university and health care systems than its neighbors Bulgaria and Romania and E.U. hopefuls such as Croatia, their distribution and the access to these institutions are uneven.²¹

With respect to the emergence of liberal democracy in Turkey, the country has experienced a major transformation in its political climate in the past decade. Mainly because of the pro-E.U. reforms, a new social dynamism has increased concern for human rights, and spectacular economic growth has taken place. However, the erosion of the state's nearly century-long assimilation policy and its control over the minority-mainstream dynamics have created new tensions. Today, Turkey struggles with the norms and culture of living together in a sociologically diverse and plural social setting.

While it is true that AKP did more than any other government to embrace Turkey's Kurdish citizens and integrate them into society under the "Kurdish Opening" program (later renamed as "Democratic Opening"), the government fell short of turning these achievements into a concrete, actionable legal framework during the Constitutional reform referendum in September 2010.

The Constitutional reform package that passed after a national referendum on September 12, 2010 mostly contained a number of cosmetic initiatives on judicial reform and allowed for Islamic headscarves to be worn by women on university campuses. Although Erdogan portrayed these reforms as an effort to increase Turkey's chances to join the European Union, the package lacked key amendments that would have given increased rights to Kurds, secured religious freedoms for non-Muslims and various minority Muslim denominations such as the Alevis, and would have addressed the deficiencies in freedom of speech and press. Mithat Sancar, an eminent Turkish political scientist and human rights activist, has criticized what he sees as the government's selective attitude with respect to the headscarf on university campuses. In a public declaration calling for enhanced individual freedoms for all, Sancar said there cannot be partial freedoms that only target the headscarf ban on university campuses. Sancar stressed that the government's reform agenda must be sincere and comprehensive enough to lift mandatory religion courses in public schools and alleviate other challenges faced by Turkey's religious minorities.²²

Whether AKP's constitutional amendments will make the judiciary more transparent remains to be seen. However, the new and improved Turkish judicial system embarrassingly failed its most important test so far, when the top brass of the Turkish Hezbollah—a radical Islamic Kurdish group (it has no ties to Hezbollah in Iran or Lebanon)—was released from prison in early 2011 because of a loophole in Turkish criminal law.²³ The Turkish Hezbollah was created in the 1990s to fight the PKK in southeast Turkey. The group later targeted top Turkish officials and aligned itself more with radical Islam. During the police raids, it was discovered that the Turkish

Hezbollah had tortured and killed hundreds of innocent people in the region and had become a terrorist network of its own.

The group's leaders had been detained earlier in 2000 after a long and bloody fight with Turkish law enforcement teams. After being imprisoned, the Hezbollah members' conviction was delayed because of lengthy trials that lasted well into 2010. They were ultimately released from jail in early January due to a law that limits the arrest period for unconvicted people.²⁴ Amid public pressure, the government instructed the judiciary to make the necessary amendments to its penal code to re-arrest the newly released Hezbollah members. Despite these efforts, the nine top members of the organization have since disappeared, and they are suspected of fleeing Turkey through Syria.

Proving even more worrisome, the AKP government's ironfisted approach to protest movements and other forms of political dissent raise serious challenges to the rosy picture of liberal democracy that liberal groups try to paint in Turkey. A series of student protests of government officials erupted in the autumn of 2010 over the lack of participatory rights in decision-making processes of public universities. Later, on December 4, 2010, a group of students gathered in Istanbul to demonstrate outside a meeting between the prime minister and university presidents were brutally beaten by the police. During the violent confrontation, a nineteen-year-old pregnant woman miscarried because of the blows she received to her belly. In the aftermath of the clashes, Erdogan defended the police and accused the students of having links to illegal underground organizations.²⁵ The students who protested Erdogan and other AKP officials at various universities after this event were also subjected to violent crackdowns from the police and harsh criminal penalties. One student who threw an egg at the Chief E.U. Negotiator Egemen Bagis to protest his speech on his university campus will face two years in prison if he loses the court battle.²⁶

The government's clampdown on the press also continues at full-speed. On March 24, 2011, law enforcement teams raided the offices of a popular liberal newspaper, *Radikal*. The police and the prosecutor's office claimed that they were acting on a tip that *Radikal* was hiding the manuscript of Ahmet Sik's upcoming book, *The Imam's Army*, which is reportedly about the emergence of an Islamist faction within the Turkish police force. Sik was one of the journalists who was taken into the police custody with the award-winning investigative reporter Nedim Sener in March. Sik, Sener and the others are accused of being members of a clandestine group called Ergenekon, which was allegedly founded in the early 2000s to engineer a military coup against the AKP government. The courts have yet to reach an official verdict on the real members and planned terrorist activities of the Ergenekon organization, but a number of journalists with dissenting opinions of the government have been behind the bars for years for alleged ties to this organization without an official court

sentence. Ironically, both Sener and Sık have devoted their careers to the investigation of and exposing clandestine organizations such as Ergenekon in Turkey and have written numerous books and articles on the issue.²⁷

During the raid of the *Radikal* offices, police investigators were seen deleting the manuscript of Sık's unpublished book from *Radikal*'s computers after having made copies for themselves. This was rightfully perceived as the suppression of free speech in an environment where the government forcefully interferes with free flow of ideas. The leak of this police action has created a major uproar among the Turkish people and strengthened fears over the AKP government's willingness to use brute force to silence dissenting voices.

Last month, the police also raided the offices of Oda TV, an online news site with a strongly anti-AKP perspective, and arrested its editors. Soner Yalcin, the editor-in-chief of Oda TV, has been a staunch critic of the government and an author of numerous books known for their fierce anti-government rhetoric. Although Oda TV is infamous for its defamation campaigns, often phony news stories, and hate speech against individuals with whom it disagrees, government prosecutors have yet to bring charges against this media organization and its editors. As has been the trend with the majority of arrests of journalists since 2008, the Turkish public is left in the dark regarding the actual charges facing the suspects.

The Way Forward: More Civil Society Dialogue

THE FUTURE OF E.U.-TURKEY RELATIONS LOOKS BLEAK. GIVEN THE DIVERGENT perspectives and trajectories of both sides, it appears that Turkey's E.U. bid is headed for another "train crash"—a popular phrase used in 2006, ahead of the critical Commission report, on the nebulous future of the negotiations. While Turkey continues to affirm its determination to join the E.U., contradictory statements made by the top cadre of Turkish officials as well as Turkey's new foreign policy direction fuel deep-seated distrust on the E.U. side. Similarly, the persistence of key E.U. countries on achieving a "privileged partnership" with Turkey, rather than full membership, and their veto on vital chapters have led to the rapid deterioration of the Turkish public's trust in the E.U. Given the approaching Turkish general elections in June 2011, it is reasonable to expect more anti-E.U. rhetoric from Turkey's elected AKP officials who will seek to drum-up support among Turkish nationalists in particular. Brussels' discussion of Turkish accession will be cold at best.

Even though intergovernmental relations are hanging by a thread, it is too early to pull the plug on Turkey's E.U. accession. This is mainly due to the existence of strong ties between the European and Turkish civil society sectors and business communities. With respect to the former, prestigious European policy research institutions have invested significantly in Turkish NGOs and think tanks. European research organizations and foundations such as the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Robert Bosch Foundation, and the Open Society Foundation are all present in Turkey and represented by a permanent office and country director. These organizations often partner with and sponsor emerging Turkish think tanks and other NGOs. Through exchange programs, workshops, roundtables, and conferences, these organizations contribute to the discourse on the E.U. accession, influence government policy and keep the public engaged. Additionally, think tanks like the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation have received significant funding from various European organizations such as the Open Society Foundation and implemented successful programs contributing to democratization efforts in Turkey via its projects on human rights, social equality and freedom of press. Similarly, Turkey's E.U. Membership Observatory was launched in 2001 as a joint project between the Istanbul Policy Center and the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute. The European Institute of the Mediterranean joined as a full partner two years later.

The Observatory project proved an essential nongovernmental initiative that promoted focused research on topics relevant to Turkey's integration in the E.U. and supported scholarly efforts in this direction. It also brought together policy and opinion makers from Turkey and the E.U. to encourage dialogue at the level of civil society and to foster a common understanding of issues. Finally, it assisted the process of negotiations by providing policy suggestions and improving the understanding of the decision makers, businessmen and active members of relevant nongovernmental organizations.

In addition, the business ties between Turkey and the European Union are the other invisible anchor that keeps Turkey and the E.U. from drifting away from each other. Business associations throughout Turkey are the only link tying the laymen in rural Anatolia and southeast Turkey to the E.U. Konya, one of the most conservative Turkish cities, receives the largest chunk of E.U. grants channeled into Turkey. The Konya Chamber of Commerce is one of the most ardent supporters of Turkey's E.U. accession because of the positive effects of the E.U. programs on the textile industry and overall competition in the region.²⁸ Despite the conservative and religious makeup of the city, Konya overwhelmingly supports Turkey's entry into the E.U., for this will bring education in European standards, accountability, competition, and standardization in industry.²⁹

Likewise, overwhelming support for the E.U. can also be found in Kayseri, another Turkish city recognized for the conservative lifestyles of its inhabitants. Kayseri is a leading exporter of home and office furniture, cotton products, rugs and other household products, and the E.U. is the primary destination for these exports. Just as in Konya, the representatives of commerce associations and NGOs stress the importance of joining the E.U. These individuals believe that Turkey can only reach the E.U. standards in all walks of life by becoming a full-fledged member of the European Union.³⁰ Moreover, Kayseri has one of the top attendance rates in the Training and Information Programs on the E.U. Funds and Project Proposals. Kayseri has been awarded eighty-six projects and received close to 12.5 million Euros in grants. The Kayseri municipality in 2007 received close to 7 million Euros for five of its projects from official E.U. funds.³¹

These examples all suggest that AKP is becoming increasingly detached from its key constituencies. In the words of the sociologist and the founder of the Liberal Thought Foundation, Berat Ozipek, “AKP’s base is way ahead of its party.” The party base, according to Ozipek, is made of four groups: conservatives, Islamists (who are a minority within the party), liberals, and leftists. The conservative majority—namely, the wealthy entrepreneurs from Anatolia with conservative religious values—has reformed itself more rapidly than any other group within the AKP constituency. The conservatives support trade, globalization, and better relations with the West. They learn about other cultures through their commercial interactions with their foreign counterparts. Like secularists, they are equally afraid of AKP’s increasing interference with business practices and free speech. They have valid fears that their assets might one day be nationalized, or that their business deals might be hampered because of major political disagreements with the party management. Moreover, the conservative majority has also become increasingly frustrated with the AKP leadership efforts linking religious conservatives with what are mounting reservations within the party to openness toward Kurdish cultural autonomy and further democratization. The conservative majority is not, in fact, opposed to Turkey becoming a more open and diverse country where people with different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds live in harmony.³²

Whether the conservative base will ultimately raise its voice in the June elections against AKP’s tampering with free markets and free speech remains to be seen. Odds are the core constituency will continue to vote for AKP in the absence of a strong opposition that also represents conservative religious values. Liberals, on the other hand, are likely to cast protest votes against AKP because of the government’s increasing undemocratic practices.

Finally, amid increasing resentment from key E.U. countries against Turkish membership and declining public support and government commitment to join the E.U.

in Turkey, it is up to the European and Turkish people to pursue this endeavor. Unlike many E.U. governments, European civil society realizes the strong contributions Turkey will make to Europe if it is allowed to join. It also understands the ramifications of a Turkey that is cast aside by Brussels and left with no option but to seek new alliances within the region. Similarly, on the grassroots level, Turkey is increasingly gaining awareness of the advantages of E.U. membership. Therefore, the time is ripe for both European and Turkish publics to engage their governments via strong civic participation, to work in tandem in order to cut the government rhetoric and to give the negotiations a new direction with constructive outcomes.

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