

Political Islam in Turkey

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Abstract

Turkey differs from the Arab states studied in the CEPS–FRIDE Political Islam project in not only in having a European Union membership prospect, but also in the fact that a broadly Islamist-oriented party has been in office since 2002. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) still enjoys the primary support of pro-Islamic constituencies in Turkish society and its orientation towards the EU has not changed since its assumption of power. An overwhelming majority in the party still sees the EU as the primary anchor of Turkish democracy and modernisation despite the inferred limitations of cooperation on issues relating to the reform of Turkish secularism. Yet the growing mistrust towards the EU as a result of perceived discrimination and EU double standards is beginning to cloud positive views within the party. Decreasing levels of support for EU membership in Turkish society and the fact that explicitly Euro-sceptic positions are now coming from both the left and the right of the political spectrum suggest that the sustainability of the pro-European discourse within the party could be difficult to maintain in the longer run.

The present working paper is based on contributions made to a conference on "Political Islam and the European Union" organised by CEPS and La Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE) and hosted by the Fundación Tres Culturas in Sevilla on 24-25 November 2006. At this conference, Arab and Turkish scholars presented papers on the 'Muslim democrat' political parties of the Arab Mediterranean states and Turkey. The papers were written in response to a set of standard questions on the following topics:

- the evolution of Islamist parties and their views on political reform issues;
- their views of Europe as a democratic model and on EU foreign policy; and
- their views on areas of potential collaboration and of differences with Europe.

The complete set of papers is currently being prepared for publication in a single volume by CEPS and FRIDE. In the meantime, we are publishing a number of the chapters of the book that are now available as CEPS Working Papers.



CEPS Working Documents are intended to give an indication of work being conducted within CEPS research programmes and to stimulate reactions from other experts in the field. Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed are attributable only to the authors in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which they are associated.

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POLITICAL ISLAM IN TURKEY

SENEM AYDIN AND RUŞEN ÇAKIR*

The AKP's evolution

When the Islamist Welfare Party won power in Turkey's 1995 elections, it conspicuously invoked political Islam and took a clear stand against the EU and NATO, advocating instead an Islamic common market and an Islamic NATO. It adopted anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli language, and tried to forge closer links with Iran, Libya and Syria. Such policies and discourse alienated the secular political elite, the military and the public to the extent that in 1997 the National Security Council moved to ease the Welfare Party out of government, in what has become known as Turkey's 'post-modern coup'.

The Welfare Party's parliamentary group joined a short-lived Virtue Party (FP), only to be closed down by the Constitutional Court in 2001 for being the 'centre of anti-secular activities'. The former Mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, together with the reformists of the Welfare Party, formed the AKP and immediately disassociated themselves from the old leadership and ideology. The party came to power in the 2002 elections, obtaining 34% of the votes. The AKP elite labelled themselves 'conservative democrats', placed a strong emphasis on democracy and human rights, advocated EU membership, supported globalisation and eschewed 'anti-Western' discourse.

There were a number of reasons for this shift in discourse and policy. The opposition of important segments of civil society and the increasing resentment of the military during the Welfare Party's coalition government were crucial. The post-modern coup initiated a "learning process" among political Islamists, with the latter realising that a party not respecting secularism "would have no chance of sustained and effective participation in the Turkish political system given its constitutional boundaries".¹ They also realised that they needed the West and democracy to build a broader front against the centres of radical secularism in the judiciary, at high levels of the state bureaucracy, in the mainstream media and especially the military. Within this framework, the EU began to be regarded as a natural ally in efforts to decrease the power of the military and to achieve a system of democratic governance, within which Islamic social and political forces would be regarded as legitimate players.²

Disassociation from the anti-Western discourse went hand in hand with the complete abandonment of the anti-globalisation discourse. Turkey's 2001 financial crisis had fully eliminated any possibility of upholding an anti-Western and anti-globalisation discourse when the country had to adhere to a strict International Monetary Fund programme and was in desperate need of foreign investment. Furthermore, the previous Welfare Party experience had also shown that a broad-based, cross-class alliance was essential for the party to attract the broader electoral base required for it to classify itself as a mass party. This alliance, which encompassed "the more dynamic and prosperous segments of society that were benefiting from

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¹ See Ziya Öniş, "The Political Economy of Turkey's AKP", in M. Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006, p. 212.

² See İhsan D. Dağı, "The Justice and Development Party: Identity, Politics, and Human Rights Discourse in the Search for Security and Legitimacy", in M. Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006.

the globalisation process in material terms as well as the more disadvantaged and underprivileged segments of society”, meant that the party could neither afford to adopt an anti-globalisation discourse nor become engaged in constant fights with the secular centre.³

The AKP is not a monolithic or homogenous party. It should rather be understood more as a coalition of different factions. This was best seen in the incident where, despite the efforts of Prime Minister Erdoğan, 99 AKP MPs in the Turkish parliament voted against the deployment of United States’ troops in south-eastern Turkey for the invasion of Iraq. Indeed, as many as five factions can be identified within the party. The core of the party and the overwhelming majority of its parliamentarians consist of individuals who were affiliated with the National Outlook Movement (NOM – the Islamist grouping that emerged in response to the 1960 military coup) in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan. Key figures such as Prime Minister Erdoğan, President of the National Assembly Bülent Arınç and the Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül are among those who come from the NOM movement. The second largest faction within the party consists of those who joined the AKP from the ranks of conventional centre-right parties – mainly the Motherland Party (ANAP) and the True Path Party. The other three factions that occupy a smaller space within the party involve Islamists from various sects who had joined the Welfare Party in the 1980s and 1990s, and moved into the AKP ranks after a gradual liberalisation of their views. These include Mr Erdoğan’s close associates from the Istanbul municipality, some of whom were technocrats not affiliated with the NOM, and some former bureaucrats, such as former Foreign Minister Yaşar Yakış, who had previously served under centre-right governments.

The AKP elite rejects formal reference to Islam or to the notion of their being ‘Muslim democrats’, as often suggested in Europe.⁴ Their preferred label of ‘conservative democracy’ remains vague, however. It is less of an ideology, and more of “an organic synthesis” that claims to “give voice to the Turkish people’s values and to bridge the gap between the state and the people”.⁵ Hence the party in fact “assumes the presence of a set of shared social values, but also claims full knowledge of society’s needs and desires”, a view that according to some analysts is open to “authoritarian expansion as the party assumes it can exercise collective reasoning on behalf of the public without making its rationale clear to those whom it is governing”.⁶ The attempt to criminalise adultery during the adoption of the new Penal Code in 2005 on grounds of such shared ‘social values’ is an example. How such values are defined, justified and selected remains (for some, dangerously) ambivalent.

Ambivalence also remains on how to approach modernity. The party’s ideological manifesto, as described in their publication *Conservative Democracy*, highlights that “it is necessary to accept modernity to its full extent...nevertheless its philosophical foundations...should be first differentiated from their misconceived practices and descriptions, [and only then] must be mixed with local values”.⁷ This stance implies that modernity and tradition are not perceived to be in conflict. But the question of “whether and how modernity’s philosophical foundations can be adopted selectively” remains unanswered.⁸

³ See Öniş (2006), op. cit.

⁴ The concept of ‘conservative democracy’ is explicitly dealt with in the AKP’s ideological manifesto by Yalçın Akdoğan, *Muhafazakar Demokrasi* [Conservative Democracy], AK Parti, Ankara, 2004.

⁵ See Sultan Tepe, “A Pro-Islamic Party? Promises and Limits of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party”, in M. Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006.

⁶ See Tepe (2006), op. cit., pp. 121-22.

⁷ See Akdoğan (2004), op. cit., p. 20, cited in Tepe (2006) *supra*, p. 122.

⁸ See Tepe (2006), op. cit., p. 122.

Such ambivalence is also present in the party's line on the public role of Islam.⁹ The AKP has implemented significant democratic reform, primarily in the fields of the fight against torture; the strengthening of civilian control over the military; the reinforcement of human rights; and the protection of minorities, freedom of expression, assembly and association. But the public role of Islam, a long-disputed cause of tension in Turkish politics, has not been addressed. One of the most prominent issues in relation to the public role of Islam concerns the headscarf ban. A Council of State decision in 1984 and, more recently, a 1997 Constitutional Court decision, prohibit the use of headscarves in all public institutions, including schools and universities. Mr Erdoğan introduced two proposals partially to reverse the ban, both of which were successfully blocked by the secularist elite. Some scholars argue that the party dropped this issue without encouraging open debates aimed at reaching a societal consensus on the matter.¹⁰ Likewise, the government's proposal to increase religious vocational schools' access to higher education was rejected by the president and then dropped instead of being amended and re-submitted. On both occasions the party had attempted to address issues of concern to its core constituency but had retreated when its proposals were resisted by the Kemalist elite – only to blame the failure on insufficient civil society activity to pressure traditional state institutions (despite the fact that the party allows very little civil society activity in its own policy-making).¹¹ In short, the AKP has not resolved the problematic relationship between Islam and Turkish secularism.

In foreign policy, the AKP government has been willing to take risks and challenge Turkey's traditional preference for preserving the status quo.¹² This characteristic has been seen in the government's strong commitment to the EU despite the setbacks, but more importantly, in its new approach to the Cyprus conflict, wherein a "win-win approach" – in Mr Erdoğan's words – was adopted in support of the Annan Plan. This change in Turkey's Cyprus policy illustrates a 'civilianisation' of Turkish foreign policy, to which the government contributed through reforms to strengthen civilian control over the military. Parliament's decision not to allow US troops through Turkey during the Iraq war and the decision not to intervene militarily in northern Iraq were also signs of the shift in Turkish foreign policy from a Hobbesian realism to a slightly more Kantian approach that espouses diplomacy, negotiation and other civilian instruments such as economic and multilateral cooperation.¹³ This new approach was also adopted towards the Arab world, with which relations have significantly improved under the AKP government. Relations with the West have been viewed as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, relations with the Islamic world. In the context of the 'zero-problems with neighbours' policy of the government, relations with both Greece and Syria have considerably improved.¹⁴ Both Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Gül have highlighted on various occasions that Israel has the right to exist and that violence against it is unacceptable, and have conveyed this message to Hamas representative Khaled Mashal, whom they agreed to receive after the Palestinian elections. The Turkish government has also started to play a much more active role in the Organisation for Islamic Countries (OIC), as part of the importance it places on multilateral settings for foreign policy-making. In the OIC, it has conveyed the message of the need for democratisation in the Arab world, embodied in the Istanbul Declaration adopted at the OIC Summit in June 2004.

⁹ Ibid., see the discussion on pp. 123-32.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 127-33.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 127.

¹² See Kemal Kirişçi, *Turkey's Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times*, EU-ISS Chaillot Paper No. 92, EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris, September 2006, pp. 49-52.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The AKP and the EU

The EU's Copenhagen political criteria mirrored the AKP's own strategy of political survival through the attainment of a wider democratic sphere of activity within Turkey, and hence relations with the EU have become a central theme of the party's agenda. In order to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of Europe held within the party, interviews with AKP members of parliament and party policy advisers were conducted in September 2006.¹⁵

All of the interviewees stated that they do not regard Turkey's political reform process as sufficient or complete. Freedom of speech, civilian control over the military, the headscarf ban, more decentralisation and reinforcement of local governance, and the quality of democratic governance were the most commonly cited areas where further and far-reaching reform was deemed necessary. Again, while aspiring to a faster and more extensive process of reform in principle, the difficulty of attaining rapid reform in the Turkish context was often highlighted. The slow changes in mentality among the population and bureaucracy were considered a major reason behind the difficulties experienced especially with implementation. As articulated by one MP:

We need further decentralisation and localisation in all areas except for foreign policy, defence and education; this is the ideal democratic model. ...However, this is impossible for Turkey in the next five to ten years. The social, cultural and educational levels of the public are not ready to support such a model and the situation in Iraq is not making it any easier. So this is indeed the ideal among the party's decision-makers, but there are restrictions that are keeping us back. ...As for the reforms that we have already undertaken in the field of democracy and human rights, more could be done, especially regarding freedom of expression. Nevertheless, a mental transformation is needed especially among the judiciary and the police force for proper implementation. Whatever the law is, you can always find a judge to try Hrant Dink.¹⁶ We can only overcome this through education. We need a new generation for the implementation and the sustainability of these reforms.

A prominent policy adviser within the party also highlighted similar points, stating:

The problem is with implementation. You cannot change an established way of thinking and behaving that has been entrenched for 40-50 years overnight. ...There is also the problem that some aspects of the process are not shared fully by all the relevant actors. Think of our bill on public administration reform, which was a very necessary law to strengthen local governments and was vetoed by the President. We should be able to achieve decentralisation without threatening the unitary nature of the state; that should be possible. The Ottoman Empire could have kept a few more territories if it delegated more power to local administrations. The same goes for civilian-military relations. It has to be internalised by all the relevant parties for genuine change to take root, but that is going to take an awful lot of time.

¹⁵ The interviews were conducted solely for the purposes of this research project. A total number of 12 persons were interviewed for this study. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format in Ankara and in Istanbul. All of the interviewees agreed to be quoted, subject to anonymity.

¹⁶ A case was filed against a famous non-governmental organisation activist and journalist, Hrant Dink, on the basis of an article he wrote on the need for Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora to make peace with their identity by refusing to view the Turks as their eternal Others. The complaint was made by the Lawyers' Association and was brought to court by a public prosecutor on the basis of Article 301. Dink was given a suspended six-month prison sentence in total disregard of the expert testimony that the article had been 'misinterpreted' and Dink appealed to the High Court. The head prosecutor of the High Court called for an annulment of the case on grounds of procedure and substance. Dink's case was referred to the High Court and his sentence was eventually reiterated.

The role of the EU is strongly acknowledged in the progress made in the areas of democratisation and human rights. The EU is not just seen as a political entity to be joined, but largely as a ‘democratic model’. This argument comes with qualifications, however. First, all of the party elites interviewed emphasised that democratisation was already among the primary aims of the party from the start of their political journey and that the EU has been more of an anchor in attaining further democracy in the country. As put by a party MP:

We felt from the very beginning the desperate need for democratisation in the country and that was one of our main starting points. I view the EU as an anchor in that process...an anchor that can help all segments of Turkish society live in peace. There will not be any grounds for radicalisation, both ethnic and religious, with the EU anchor firmly in place. The EU project will also decrease the impact of politics on society by promoting good governance. The Turkish people will then expect policy-making from the politicians rather than daily demands that are the outcome of inefficient and corrupt governance.

A party policy adviser expressed thoughts along the same line, stating:

As a party, we wish to see a more democratic Turkey, but we have to face the fact that our internal dynamics are not sufficient enough to achieve this. The EU compensates for insufficient internal dynamism. ...I am not saying that there are no problems with democracy in Europe. Look at how the French Armenians are exploiting French democracy, against the interests of France. But you cannot turn your back on it just because it has its problems. The democracy in Europe is still the best model today.

Another MP provided further details as to how the EU’s process coincided with the agenda of the party:

February 28 has shown us that there are some things that Turkey cannot achieve on her own. I am not talking about Turkey becoming a Shari’a state. What I am talking about is an environment where you can teach your child as much about religion as you want, where my wife can wear whatever she likes and where I will not be punished because of my religious beliefs. We realised that the prominence of individual rights within the EU can actually help us in decreasing the weight of the institutions in the Turkish political system and hence achieve the minimum in sustaining our lifestyles.

Second, the EU is not viewed as possessing one single model of democracy that the country can take as a point of reference. Several different democratic practices on diverse issues are acknowledged to exist in Europe. As a policy adviser in the party held:

There is not a single model of democracy in Europe. It is the fundamental principles that matter the most to us, and those are embodied in the Copenhagen political criteria and they are not exclusive to Europe, they are universal principles. There are vast differences between the way in which democracies are institutionalised and function in Europe. Just look at the way in which religion–state relations are regulated. On the one hand, you have a country like France, and on the other hand you have a country like Greece, which can be classified as an almost theocratic state. Turkey can benefit from different practices in different member states, depending on its own needs.

Regarding the more specific democratic practices that Turkey can adopt from Europe, two issues are prioritised, namely minority rights and religious freedoms (more specifically, the public role of religion) – the two unresolved tensions of Turkish politics. In the case of minority rights, the French model is considered to be more suitable for Turkey, whereas in the field of religious freedoms, the UK model prevails.

Third, while these perceptions are dominant among the majority of the party elite, this does not mean that problems with European democracies are overlooked. It should be noted that alternative yet minority discourses that do not hold Europe as a democratic model exist. As an MP who explicitly claims to be a Euro-sceptic argued:

Europe is not a democratic model for Turkey. Europe is the by-product of ruthless wars, the EU itself is a product of Europe's ruthlessness. It has all been about how three big and three small member states control each other. I have in mind a democracy that is more replete with virtue and empathy. I find Europe to be too 'worldly'...It is true that reforms are easier to sell to the public when the EU is there, it triggers the learning process in society and the technical requirements that it introduces can improve living standards, but that is all. I don't share the view that it is a community of consistent values.

The same MP also expressed critical thoughts on the rights of Muslim minorities within Europe, "It is true that Muslims benefit from generous rights in most member states. However, these rights are not considered natural by birth, with their philosophical foundations. They give them rights because they have to and this is where the problem lies."

Another MP who had reservations about Europe as a normative reference for democratic aspirations also expressed his doubts regarding the state of Muslim minority rights in Europe: "Europe's experience with minorities only goes back 50 years. It has very little experience on this issue. This is why Muslim minorities are experiencing serious problems in Europe. Europe does not know how to deal with people from different cultures, whereas we have a 1,000 year history of living in a multicultural environment."

It is not only the more Euro-sceptic elite who are critical of Muslim minority rights in Europe. Other more pro-European elites also perceive problems with the way in which Muslim minorities are treated in Europe. Still, they often distinguish between different country practices, viewing some models – the British, the Dutch and the Scandinavian – more favourably than they do others, such as that of the French. It is believed that in terms of the rights granted to Muslims, even the most restricted country, France, where there is no headscarf ban in universities, is a far more advanced case than Turkey. In the words of a political adviser:

Countries have different practices in Muslim minority rights. On the one hand, you have the Dutch model, and on the other hand, you have the French model. They are all having problems, especially with racism and xenophobia, but overall, I don't see a huge problem here. There are around 6,000 mosques in Germany, there is no headscarf ban anywhere in Europe and they can all practice their religion as they please.

An MP voiced similar opinions, stating:

Problems with Muslim minority rights exist in some, but not in all European countries. Look at Holland. There are 264 mosques that the Turks go to, there is no headscarf ban, and there are no problems with religious education. The Moroccans for example have their own separate mosques. However, you also have more problematic cases like France. Recently, some problems began to emerge in Germany since they want to restrict education in the mother tongue. So these problems don't always have something to do with Islam, but they can also be about language. But I still don't see a huge problem there.

There were other party officials who sought to provide a more detailed account of the problems regarding Muslim minority rights in Europe, for example one who stated:

I think the issue has a psychological, institutional and an economic dimension. At the psychological level, the prevailing notion of Euro-centrism and the feeling of uniqueness among some in Europe have prevented Europe from being a melting pot like the United States. At the institutional level, you need strong institutional mechanisms to integrate these people, to give them proper religious education to prevent radicalism, to teach them the language of the host country and to preserve the cultures of the minority groups. You cannot achieve these via things like language tests. At the economic level, you need to make sure that these people have a chance to move beyond their ghettos. That of course requires strong political commitment. Immigration policies also require close relations with the countries of origin. For example, our relations with Germany are in a much better state now than they used to be.

The issue of Muslim minority rights in Europe is often related to the debate over the differences and similarities between the EU and US models of democracy. Such comparison is made in two related spheres. One concerns democratic practices within Europe and the US, whereas the second relates to the use of the notion of democracy in foreign policy, specifically in the southern neighbourhood. Regarding democratic practices within the two, despite acknowledging the prevailing notion of ‘security’ and the curbing of freedoms in the US in the post-11 September period, the US model is still viewed more favourably in the context of minority rights, religious freedoms and the application of secularism in the country. As one party official argued:

National identity is very strong in Europe, unlike in the US. Being German comes from birth; it is very difficult to acquire it later. If you do not speak good French, you cannot be a Frenchman. Britain has a rooted past based on traditions. It is easier to integrate in the US, to move up in the system. An immigrant can become a foreign minister in the US whereas this would be very difficult in the case of Europe.

According to an MP:

[O]n the issue of religion, the Anglo-Saxons have encountered Islam in more peaceful circumstances. So especially until 11 September, there has been less prejudice towards Islam in the US. Continental Europe in particular has fought Islam for centuries in its history and so their attitude towards Islam is more hostile than the Americans. Religion is a more distinguishing feature in Europe than it is in the US.

Similarly, another MP expressed the following sentiments:

It is true that the US experienced a serious turning point in its democracy after 11 September. It has entered a phase of paranoia on security and terrorism. However, as for the upper limits of democracy, the margins always were and still are wider in the US than in Europe since the regime still has a lot of confidence in itself. The democratic system still works better in America. Just look at secularism and religious freedoms in the US and you will appreciate how wide the margins really are.

These statements are also in line with the findings of other scholars who argue that AKP officials feel closer to the US model, which is referred to as a kind of “passive secularism”, wherein “the state is neutral towards various religions, but allows the public visibility of religion”, as opposed to practices in countries such as France, where “the state favours a secular worldview in the public sphere and aims to confine religion to the private sphere”, also referred to as “assertive secularism”.¹⁷

The instance in which American democracy is most criticised is the way in which US foreign policy practices are not challenged sufficiently in the domestic sphere. As a party official underlined:

There are two sides to America. It is doing rather well on the inside, but its foreign policy practices make us question the democratic practice inside the country. In Europe, public opinion and civil society are able to constrain governments. Aznar lost the elections in Spain because of his stance on the war in Iraq. Blair has been put in a difficult position in the UK, but this does not go for the US.

A related argument is put forward by another party MP, “One thing about US democracy is that brain-washing of the public is much easier there than it is in Europe. In that sense, I see a deeper understanding of democracy among the European publics.”

¹⁷ See Ahmet T. Kuru, “Reinterpretation of Secularism in Turkey: The Case of the Justice and Development Party”, in M. Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006, p. 137.

Some party officials have been highly critical of the way in which the notion of democracy is upheld in both European and American foreign policies, while others have emphasised that they find Europe to be more genuine in its efforts to promote democracy in its neighbourhood. The remarks of a prominent foreign policy adviser are exemplary of those who criticise the notion of democracy in both European and American foreign policy approaches:

One can argue that the EU is more principled and genuine than instrumental when it comes to democratisation in its candidate countries. However when it comes to other countries, Europe behaves very pragmatically. Look at the way in which they supported the military coup in Algeria for example, or look at their policies in the southern neighbourhood. The use of democracy in US foreign policy can also be considered fully instrumental, even more so than in Europe since you cannot be a candidate to join the US. For the US, democracy is an instrument that is disguised as a principle. You only need to look at the reactions of the US to the elections held in Iraq, Egypt and Palestine last year. Palestinian elections were the fairest; participation was very low in Iraq and there were population displacements; the opposition was not even given a chance in Egypt. Elections in Iraq were found much more successful and legitimate, the results in Egypt were considered legitimate, but the results of the Palestinian elections were not even considered legitimate. So the US only approaches democracy from the perspective of its own foreign policy interests and this goes pretty much for Europe as well.

An MP making a similar argument stated, “I think both the EU and the US lack sincerity in their foreign policy approaches. For them it is all about how democracy can be instrumentalised for their own interest. They do not have any problems with authoritarianism in Jordan, Egypt or Saudi Arabia, but they are pushing for democracy in other countries.”

Yet, this dual critique is not shared by all in the party. An equal number of interviewees consider EU foreign policy and its emphasis on democratisation as more sincere, although they question its effectiveness in practice. As one MP stated:

EU foreign policy is much softer and relies more on diplomacy and gradual change. The US tries to bring democracy through force, not through dialogue and participation of all the parties concerned. The EU expects countries to reform themselves from within and lays down the rules for that. The US forces you to apply the rules that it has set. Until 2002, Turkey was completely under the orbit of the US and its democracy has not exactly benefited from it; in fact, just the opposite.

Another party official expressed similar thoughts:

I find EU foreign policy to be more genuine than that of the US. The problem with the EU is that there are many different member states with diverse interests preventing it from having a strong common foreign policy. There are those that are closer to the US and those that are at the other end of the spectrum. [*sic*] How can you expect them to formulate a coherent and effective foreign policy like that?

A discussion about EU and US foreign policy approaches revealed that the party elite has a high level of awareness of EU policy in the Mediterranean, and although EU efforts in the region are viewed more favourably in comparison with those of the US they are still criticised. The criticism is mainly on the grounds that the EU’s primary concern is to secure its own interests in the region and that it does not allow for equal, sufficient and effective participation of the relevant parties in the southern neighbourhood. In the words of a party official:

The ENP is in principle a good policy. Now that the Union has new members, the relations between its members in the periphery and the new neighbours have become more important than ever. You need to establish stronger and institutionalised cooperation mechanisms in the neighbourhood. The EU cannot pull its weight in the Mediterranean since it cannot escape from its pragmatic outlook on the region. It only cares about Tunisia and Morocco so that further instability does not lead to mass immigration into Europe. So I believe that

keeping the region under a certain degree of control is more important for the Union than actually democratising it. This makes it very difficult for long-term principles to take root. This is not very different from what the EU is doing in the eastern neighbourhood. For example, it does not question what is happening between Armenia and Azerbaijan. You see an important amount of selectivity there.

Another party official criticised the policy on the basis that the relationship between the EU and the neighbourhood countries is not one of equal partners: “I think the EU policy in the Mediterranean has the potential to be successful, but the EU has to stop viewing its Mediterranean policy as a one-sided favour rather than a constructive dialogue. The policy needs to reach a position where the two parties stand on equal grounds. I do not think that it has come to that stage yet.”

Cooperation and conflict

There are four main areas that AKP party officials hold to be the main spheres of cooperation with the EU, namely the strengthening of democracy and human rights (some explicitly mention the further civilianisation of Turkish politics), economic relations, good governance through the adoption of the EU *acquis*, and foreign and security policy (including energy issues).

It is believed that “not only can the EU help Turkey in further democratisation but Turkey can also help the EU in spreading democracy in its neighbourhood”, as one official put it. In terms of economic relations, the levels of trade and investments between the EU and Turkey are often cited as the primary indicators of how the two economies are intertwined and how further investment in particular would be beneficial for the Turkish economy. Regarding foreign and security policy, the ‘interdependence’ of the two sides is a recurrent theme, although the EU is often found to be ‘underutilising’ the potential for collaboration with Turkey in this area. According to a party official:

Foreign policy issues that are not primary to Europe are of crucial importance to us, like Northern Iraq and Nagorno-Karabakh. The Turkish foreign policy agenda coincides with the UN’s agenda. Turkey has more foreign policy responsibilities and concerns than the EU. As long as the EU does not feel the same degree of importance in the same areas, effective harmonisation and cooperation will be difficult to achieve. There is a significant degree of cooperation and consultation mechanisms...when it comes to domestic policy. We need equally strong consultation and cooperation mechanisms in foreign policy matters. The EU has turned to Turkey on problems with Iran; Turkey’s policy in the Iraq war and in Lebanon was in line with the EU; consultations were made on Palestine; but these need to be strengthened and better institutionalised.

Conflictual areas can be classified under two main headings. One concerns the headscarf ban, which is viewed by an overwhelming majority of party officials as a human rights problem that is overlooked by the EU. The other conflictual area relates to the perception that the EU is applying a policy of double standards to Turkey.

Concerning the headscarf ban, on 29 June 2004, in the case of *Leyla Şahin v. Turkey*, the European Court of Human Rights decided that the Turkish state had not violated the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms by expelling Leyla Şahin from university because of her headscarf. The interviews conducted for this paper confirm that this decision has led to a significant degree of disappointment with Europe within the AKP, although it would be wrong to state that it has substantially reversed the party’s overall pro-EU orientation. It can be argued that the case led to a reassessment among certain segments of the party as to how far Europe could contribute to changes in Turkish secularism. The fact that EU reports only focus on the rights of Alevis and the non-Muslim minorities while keeping silent about the situation of the Sunni majority is also a factor that has helped strengthen this opinion. As a parliamentarian highlighted:

I am very sensitive on the headscarf issue. Europe is liberal about the rights of everyone, but very cruel when it comes to one of the most important issues. They do not see this as a human rights issue. This has created a serious break of morale for us and led to disappointment with the EU. We feel really alone in an essential area of cooperation. Some in Europe understand, some do not. I do not know how we can ever put the message across.

Another MP expressed similar sentiments:

What really bothers me about the silence of the EU on the headscarf ban is the fact that nowhere in Europe is there a stricter ban than the one in Turkey, not even in France. For a pious woman, the headscarf is not the symbol of oppression but of liberation; this is what they do not understand. ...What is even worse is the fact that when the issue is the headscarf or the religious freedoms of the Sunni majority, the EU sides with the Turkish military. The Turkish military then cleans its hands of the issue and leaves it to the EU, knowing that they can be just as strict.

Although these criticisms seem to reflect the stance of the majority in the party, there are also the voices of others in the margin who do not see this as a conflictual issue in relations with the EU. As one parliamentarian argued:

I do not think that the headscarf issue in Turkey has anything to do with the EU. True, Europe has its own issues with the headscarf, but I do not think that the EU should interfere in how Turkey deals with this issue. This is something that we ourselves have to resolve, through societal consensus; the EU does not have enough knowledge or experience of Turkish customs, traditions or religion to intervene in this matter.

In the second area of conflict, namely the perception of EU double standards and discrimination, concerns seem to be even more profound and unanimously shared. It also needs to be noted that these concerns overlap almost entirely with those of the secularist establishment about the EU. Such perceptions of double standards are invoked in relation to various issues. EU policy in Cyprus is chief among them. All of our interviewees berated EU policy in Cyprus as a blatant act of discrimination against Turkey. As one policy adviser argued, “the constant rewarding of Greek Cypriots after the referendum has led to cleavages within the party”. Another issue in which discrimination is inferred relates to minority rights, particularly regarding the rights of the Kurdish minority. The example of the French model often arises as the most suitable for Turkey in this respect. It is also very commonly held that the EU overlooks its own minority problems such as the situation of the Turkish/Muslim minority in Greece while it is applying pressure on Turkey. The issue of minority rights is often brought up together with the Armenian genocide debate. This issue is influenced by the fact that the European Parliament’s Eurlings report in its draft format asked for recognition of the Armenian genocide as an official criterion for Turkey’s accession. In the words of one MP, “You cannot possibly force this population to endorse a crime that it has not committed. This is a problem with the EU’s own collective sub-conscious, trying to spread its own guilty conscious onto others.”

Another issue that elicits the discrimination argument involves the clause that allows permanent derogations in the EU’s negotiating framework with Turkey. As one party official underlined:

The EU is saying that they need to allow for permanent derogations to ease the concerns of their public. They are also saying that it is our duty to win the hearts and minds of European citizens. Why was this argument never made for any other candidate country? I really believe that the EU is not being fair to Turkey.

Such double standards are very often held to be the symptomatic surface of the EU’s unwillingness to have a Muslim country ‘in the club’. As the same party official remarks, “The main perception in the party is one of being discriminated against by the EU because we come from a different cultural and religious background. The EU cannot be explicit about this, so

instead they are trying to make us give up on the way by asking for requirements not asked from other candidates.”

Islamists outside the AKP

The AKP is not the only party in the Turkish political landscape that has a pro-Islamic orientation. The party that it split from – now functioning under the name of the Saadet [Felicity] Party (SP) – tries to appeal to a core Islamist constituency from further to the right of the political spectrum and a more explicitly Islamic outlook. The SP only managed to win 2.5% of the votes in the 2002 elections and hence it is not represented in parliament.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it can still be considered a challenger to the AKP’s core constituency who may be alienated from the party because of its reluctance to act on issues regarding the public role of Islam. In this respect, the party programme states, “The artificial impediments in education that are against human rights and the principles of belief will be abolished, the practices that prevent the graduates of religious schools to enter the faculty of their choice will be lifted. Human rights and democracy courses and courses on religion and ethics will be compulsory in schools.”

The party has also returned to its 1970s slogan of ‘ethics and morality first’, which was not present in the discourse of its predecessor party in the 1980s and 1990s:

Ethics and morality are our flags. History has witnessed that nations who stick to their moral and ethical values have established big civilisations whereas those that deviated from them have lost their power. ...For that reason, we believe that the strengthening of our ethics is compulsory for a healthy community.

The SP also adopts an anti-Western outlook with a discourse that is once again reminiscent of the 1970s National Salvation Party. It is explicitly against the US and is strongly opposed to accession to the EU. Europe is viewed as a ‘Christian club’ that a country of Muslim people should not seek to join. As the head of the party, Recai Kutan, has recently stated:

Is there any other party in Anatolia that supports opposition to the US other than us? No. There is only the Felicity Party that represents the National Outlook. The obsession with the European Union has destroyed them [the AKP]. They keep on saying ‘we will never let Turkey join, not in a thousand years’. When will Turkey join the EU then? Only when religious people die and those young generations [of Turks] who are able to convert are fully grown up. Only then Turkey will be accepted in the European Union, which is a Christian club.¹⁹

The incompatibility of Western values with Islam is also often invoked together with claims that instead of pressing for EU membership, Turkey should look more towards the East. According to Mr Kutan, “full membership of the EU means compromising independence and surrendering to Western culture and civilisation”, whereas Turkey should be “leading the Islamic world to create a more just world order”.²⁰ Europe and Islam are often placed in binary opposition to each other where Islam is looked upon as the biggest enemy of Europe today. It is observed that such SP discourse usually intensifies in the immediate aftermath of key events such as the visit by Pope Benedict XVI to Turkey and the Danish cartoons crisis. Immediately following the latter episode, the party’s Vice President, Lütfü Esengün, argued that “this event has revealed once again Europe’s true face as an enemy of the East and Islam with its media, governments, courts and civil society institutions...this comes from history. Animosity towards Islam is in the

¹⁸ There is a 10% electoral threshold for representation in the Turkish parliament.

¹⁹ See the *Milli Gazete*, 12 June 2005.

²⁰ See the speech of SP Chairman Recai Kutan as reported in *Milli Gazete*, 5 November 2006.

genes of the West...Europe displays its hatred and vengeance...at every available opportunity.”²¹

It is very often claimed that Western civilisation, of which Europe is held to be an essential component, is unjust and consists of double standards. In the words of the party’s vice chairman, “The main source of the problems that we are suffering today lies in modern Western values. In this sense we are facing a civilisational crisis. ...The values of the Western world can no longer sustain this world.”²²

The SP is not only opposed to closer relations with Europe solely on cultural and civilisational grounds, but also on the basis of the extreme nationalist stance that Europe’s ultimate aim is to divide and partition the country. The two arguments are often combined in expressing oppositional views to Europe: “The concessions given to Europe threaten the country’s unity, enslave the Turkish economy and corrupt our moral values”²³ and “Europe’s aim is to have a disintegrating and Christianised Turkey”.²⁴

The ‘hostile’ Europe that the SP discourse constructs is not a model of democracy and human rights, but one of a ruthless entity that turns a blind eye to developments in the southern neighbourhood:

Those Europeans who teach us human rights lessons are themselves human rights violators. Hundreds of thousands of people are being slaughtered only because of their beliefs in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. This is the Western conception of human rights; their civilisation upholds blood, tears and sheer force...the AKP is talking of attaining EU standards. Europe is not a civilisation; who are you taking as a model?²⁵

Turkey’s Hizbollah party is a marginal force; based in south-east Turkey, it is a militant Islamist Sunni group unrelated to the Lebanon-based Shi’ite Hizbollah, with a history of violent struggle with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The Turkish Hizbollah is not a strong political force; rather it has managed to survive by virtue of its social roots. It is the part of the Islamist spectrum most clearly at odds with the EU. Indeed, the main preoccupation of the Turkish Hizbollah is now related to European countries’ clampdown on (what are deemed to be) terrorist groups, rather than its opposition to the Turkish state. Hizbollah claims that it has renounced violence, but serious doubts remain over the compatibility of its ideology with the democratic values pursued by the government in cooperation with the EU. There is no strong evidence to suggest that the ultimate goal of jihad has been dropped from the Hizbollah agenda. Although a marginal force, Hizbollah still competes with Kurdish nationalism for the allegiances of people in the south-east, presenting a potential threat of further instability in a region that already requires far-reaching reforms on the road to EU accession.

²¹ See the article “İslam düşmanlığı batının genlerine işlemiştir” on the SP website, 8 February 2006 (retrieved from <http://www.sp.org.tr/haber.asp?list=6&haber=918>).

²² See the speech of SP Vice President Numan Kurtuluş, delivered at the Confederation of Civil Servants’ Union (Memur-Sen), published on the SP website 24 November 2006 (retrieved from <http://www.sp.org.tr/haber.asp?list=2&haber=1208>).

²³ See the speech of SP Vice President Temel Karamollaoğlu, delivered at the Party Press Conference at the SP Headquarters, published on the SP website 10 November 2006 (retrieved from <http://www.sp.org.tr/haber.asp?list=2&haber=1175>).

²⁴ See the speech of the President of Anatolian Youth Association İlyas Tongus, delivered at the Regional Education Seminar of the Anatolian Youth Association, published on the SP website 12 December 2006 (retrieved from <http://www.sp.org.tr/haber.asp?list=1&haber=1233>).

²⁵ See the speech of İlyas Tongus, delivered at the Anatolian Youth Association, Karaman Branch, published on the SP website 17 October 2006 (retrieved from <http://www.sp.org.tr/haber.asp?list=2&haber=1157>).

Conclusions

An overwhelming majority of AKP members view the EU as the primary anchor of Turkish democracy and modernisation, despite the perceived limitations of cooperation on issues relating to the reform of Turkish secularism. Yet growing mistrust towards the EU as a result of inferred discrimination and double-standard practices by the EU has a serious potential to reverse these perceptions within the party. This concern also links to arguments over the emergence of a Turkish model for other Muslim countries. Turkey is indeed a case in which an Islamic legacy has not prevented democratic reform and it is being watched closely by some of the political movements in the Arab world, thanks also to Turkey's improving relations with its southern neighbours. Nevertheless, the EU accession process, which has played a crucial role in triggering change, remains uncertain and Turkey still has not come to terms with issues arising from the politics of Islamic identity that lie at the heart of the debates over Islam and democracy. On top of this, the Turkish experience with secularism, however problematic, has also played a unique and powerful role in shaping the opinions of Islamists in the country, making it very difficult to emulate Turkey's reform process elsewhere in the Muslim world. Hence, rather than being a "model", one can at best see Turkey as "an example from which lessons can be drawn",²⁶ hoping that it will, in the meantime, stay on course for full democratisation and EU accession.

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²⁶ See Kirişçi (2006), op. cit., p. 102.

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