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Turkey at a Tipping Point

JENNY WHITE

Something substantially different is shaping up in today's Turkey. Given the many variables in play, no one can be sure what the country will look like in 10 years. The recent autocratic turn of the pious former prime minister and now president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, cannot be explained simply as a form of Islamic radicalization. After more than a decade of economic growth and social reform under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Muslim and Turkish identities have been transformed to such an extent that it is nearly impossible to assign people to one end or the other of a secular-Islamist divide, particularly that half of the population that is under 30. Many young people have heterogeneous identities, composed of seemingly contradictory positions and affiliations. Turkey is now split along more complex lines, pitting Sunni against Sunni, Sunni against Alevi (a heterodox Shia sect that makes up more than 10 percent of the population), and both pious and secular nationalists against Kurds. It could be argued that a lust for power and profit on the part of one man and his inner circle, rather than a wider cohort, has driven recent events as much as religion. This is no novelty in the world of dictators, which may well be the direction Turkey is taking.

Part of the answer to what is happening in the present lies in the past, in Kemalist practices (the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded the modern Turkish state in 1923) that still powerfully shape social and political life today. Erdoğan, threatened by recent street protests and the actions of a rival Islamic movement, has returned to the fearmongering and aggressive political paternalism that were ingrained in the

Turkish psyche for much of the twentieth century, making them powerful tools for social manipulation. Kemalism has been largely dethroned, but the levers of power it developed remain in place. In the absence of Kemalist symbolism, AKP rule has taken on an Ottoman and Sunni Muslim veneer.

What is fundamentally different, though, is that Erdoğan has begun, for the first time, to dismantle the democratic structures that, creaky and biased though they were, provided a balance of power among institutions. Under Erdoğan, these institutions, from universities and the media to police, prosecutors, and judges, have been forced to answer not to a party, but essentially to one man who has taken control of most mechanisms of rule. This is a new and worrisome development, out of step with the AKP's (and Erdoğan's) accomplishments over the previous decade. Those who claim to have seen this coming could have done so only by closing their eyes to what the party accomplished—and what these newest developments put at risk.

DAVID OR GOLIATH?

From 2002 until 2011, the AKP attracted a wide variety of voters, drawn to its economic program, global outlook, revival of Turkey's European Union accession process, and introduction of much-needed reforms, which included placing the military under civilian control. The party profited from a reservoir of public sympathy and support after the military in 2007 and the Constitutional Court in 2008 threatened to bring the government down for alleged anti-secular activities. The AKP represented David against the military Goliath that had ousted several governments since 1960.

Once in power, the AKP reached out to minorities and former national enemies like Greece and Armenia. It broke nationalist taboos by acknowl-

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edging, to some degree, the 1915 Armenian massacres and the slaughter of Alevis at Dersim in 1937 and 1938, while pursuing a solution to the division of Cyprus, Kurdish cultural rights, and peace with the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Per capita income doubled on the AKP's watch, although unemployment remained near 10 percent, with youth unemployment much higher and women's labor force participation just 29 percent. An improved economy, social welfare, and new roads and subways brought votes, while opposition parties were ineffectual. This combination continues to be successful: About half of the population consistently votes for the AKP (43 percent in March local elections and 52 percent in the August presidential election). In other words, the AKP appears to have done well by the country, and there is no other party voters trust to keep the train on the rails.

A noticeable change in direction occurred in 2011. In a general election that June, the AKP won just under 50 percent of the vote, giving it a majority of 326 seats in the 550-seat parliament, and empowering Erdoğan to centralize power. He replaced independent thinkers in the party with loyalists who often lacked the requisite experience or expertise. The military was brought to heel through a series of trials (known as the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases) and the subsequent imprisonment of hundreds of high-ranking officers accused of plotting coups. In July 2011, the chief of the general staff and the commanders of the land, sea, and air forces resigned en masse; they were replaced by more tractable men. Once the threat of a military coup and dissenting voices within the party were removed, the AKP's message became narrower, focused on a romanticized notion of Ottoman Sunni brotherhood, and more intolerant. Erdoğan began to see enemies and threats everywhere, mistaking dissent and protest against government policies for coup attempts.

For most of its rule, the AKP had worked in tandem with the Hizmet movement led by the Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, who has lived in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania since 1997. Hizmet excelled at setting up well-regarded schools and businesses in Turkey and abroad, with the aim of developing what Gülen called a "golden

generation" of youth equipped with business and science skills and Muslim ethics, who could staff state agencies. For every embassy the AKP government opened abroad—dozens in sub-Saharan Africa alone—Hizmet would set up local schools and businesses. But relations between the AKP and Hizmet began to fray several years ago.

Hizmet is widely thought to have a heavy presence in the Turkish police and security services. In December 2013, Erdoğan accused it of being behind prosecutors and police who tried to arrest close members of his circle on corruption charges. He claimed that the investigation was a coup attempt, and that Hizmet had created a "parallel state." He transferred or fired thousands of police officers and prosecutors in a successful attempt to derail the charges. The AKP also closed down Hizmet's lucrative prep schools in Turkey and brought Bank Asya, which is associated with Gülen, to its knees by orchestrating a massive withdrawal of deposits. Each side, proclaiming its Sunni piety, has vowed to destroy the other.

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OUT OF TOUCH

In response to this perceived coup attempt, the AKP curtailed civil liberties, banning YouTube and Twitter after they were used to circulate taped evidence from the corruption investigation. Recently passed laws allow intrusive government surveillance and arrests of citizens for thought crimes. Given the jailing and harassment of journalists and protesters, and the impunity of the police in using violence, little is now possible in the way of freedom of speech. Erdoğan has revived the Kemalist threat paradigm, using the same language, railing against outside and inside enemies, and presenting himself in his campaign ads and speeches as the heroic savior of the nation, the patriarchal father protecting the honor of his national family and keeping the dangerous chaos of liberalism at bay.

By pulling the levers of suspicion and social polarization, Erdoğan appeals to the conservative nationalist core of his supporters, but he is out of touch with a large part of the population. There is a growing disconnect between the twenty-first-century aspirations of both pious and secular youth, who grew up in the AKP environment of great promise, and the twentieth-century values and practices of Turkey's leadership, which cannot bend to meet that promise and is preoccupied

with serving its own interests. The AKP raked in enormous profits through rampant development all over the country, despoiling environments, neighborhoods, and archaeological sites. The 2013 demonstrations began as a peaceful sit-in to save Gezi Park in Istanbul's Taksim Square, then grew into a nationwide protest against the disproportionate police violence used to break it up.

The Gezi events occurred around the same time that enormous crowds filled Cairo streets to show their approval of the Egyptian army's coup against President Mohamed Morsi. Erdoğan, who felt a kinship with the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi, clearly viewed the Gezi protests in light of the events in Egypt, convinced that the protesters were plotting to overthrow him. He responded with an all-out crackdown, including arrests of protesters under draconian terrorism laws. It is not only secular youth, however, who have taken up the call of environmentalism and other social justice issues. There has been a convergence in lifestyle and aspirations between secular and pious youth, who have developed a taste for making their own choices and demanding accountability.

Erdoğan's increasing volatility and consolidation of power have opened fissures in the AKP edifice. Party members uncomfortable with his policies dare not speak up. Many hoped that Abdullah Gül, when he stepped down from the presidency in August, would capitalize on his popularity and legitimacy by leading a moderate branch of the party, but he has disappeared from the headlines.

Even the conservative provincial folk who make up a large part of the AKP's core constituency have recoiled from the gloves-off exercise of raw power by Erdoğan and his circle, which even religious pretexts can no longer disguise. Earlier this year, many citizens were shocked by the callousness with which Erdoğan and his advisers treated family members waiting for news of their missing relatives after a mine disaster in the western town of Soma, in which 301 miners were killed. Despite media censorship, a photo of an Erdoğan aide kicking a miner went viral, as did a video of a large crowd booing the prime minister. Erdoğan was forced to take refuge in a market, where he was caught on camera punching another miner.

Another wild card is the recruitment of Turks by Islamic State (ISIS) jihadists to join the group's fighters in Iraq and Syria. Many of its recruits hail from nearby countries like Iraq and Saudi Arabia; they have moved freely across Turkey's borders and taken up residence in its cities and

border towns. Turkey's largely Sunni and Alevi population has no affinity with ISIS's puritan Salafist creed and in the past has been suspicious of foreigners, including Arabs. But the weakening of physical borders as a result of the AKP's dream of a Muslim union of states in former Ottoman lands, and the breakdown of firm national and Muslim identities and proliferation of alternative practices beyond "Turkish Islam," have opened cracks in Turkish society in which ISIS can establish roots.

SÈVRES SYNDROME

Over the past decade, Washington slowly and somewhat reluctantly came to the realization that Turkey was no longer the pliant, army-led Kemalist ally of Cold War years, but had become a self-possessed nation with a booming economy, proactive foreign policy, global political and economic reach, and a headstrong and openly pious Muslim prime minister. Pundits initially warned that the Islam-rooted AKP was moving the country away from the West and toward the Islamic East, but that view dissipated when it became clear that Turkey was pursuing interests in Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, South America, and Asia, not just the Middle East. The new Turkish leaders imagined themselves walking in the footsteps not of Atatürk, the war hero and first president of the nation, but of the Ottomans, lords of a world empire. When the Middle East imploded in the 2011 Arab uprisings and their turbulent aftermath, Turkey seemed to be the one stable Muslim-majority country left standing in the region.

This new brand of Turkey emerged in sharp contrast to the crisis-ridden country of earlier decades. Although the Kemalist state oversaw free and fair elections that became the expected standard, the country was micromanaged socially and politically by elites positioned in state institutions and by the military, which carried out several coups when it felt that national unity was threatened by nonconforming identities and ideologies. This aggressive defensiveness, which some scholars call Turkey's Sèvres Syndrome, is a century-long hangover from the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire by the Europeans, formalized by the 1923 Treaty of Sèvres.

Since then, in schoolbooks and a variety of rituals from grade school to adulthood, Turks have learned to be militant, to know who their enemies are, and to be suspicious of outsiders. Polls show that a majority of Turks not only lead the world in disliking the United States, but they dislike pretty

much everyone else too, Muslim countries included. That hostility extends to next-door neighbors with different religious beliefs or lifestyles. A continual drumbeat of acts of intolerance against Armenians, Greek Christians, Protestants, Kurds, Alevis, Roma, Jews, and others has left deep tears in the social fabric.

Citizenship, in the sense of a contract between the nation-state and its people, was poorly developed. Schoolchildren were taught that the ideal quality was unquestioning obedience to the state, the highest expression of which would be to sacrifice their lives for it. There was little mention of what the state would provide for its citizens, aside from protection against the ever-present threat posed by what were called inside and outside enemies, the bogeymen of the nation-state. The current constitution, written under military oversight following a 1980 coup, is designed to protect the rights of the state, not the individual. Kemalism's message was one of unceasing embattlement, buttressed by conspiracy theories, and nurturing a deep-seated belief that a strong patriarchal state (*Devlet Baba*, or Father State, in popular parlance) and army were necessary in order to protect the national family and its citizen children from outsiders still hell-bent on destroying them.

MUSLIM NATIONALISM

Non-Muslim citizens and other ethnic minorities like the Kurds suffered greatly under Kemalist nationalist policies that defined them as pawns manipulated by outside powers to undermine Turkish national unity. Although Kemalists promoted a secular lifestyle, their policies were based on a religio-racial understanding of Turkishness that was contingent on being Muslim. Yet Kemalist Islam did not require piety and, indeed, eyed it with suspicion; for many years, the headscarf was barred from government offices and universities (the ban was lifted in 2013). Until the 1990s, the headscarf and other overt demonstrations of piety were associated with the rural poor and urban migrants from the countryside, both romanticized and disdained.

The Kemalist state ran a tight Islamic ship. The Presidency of Religious Affairs controlled mosques, religious teaching, and public expressions of faith. State laicism was not secularism

so much as state-controlled Sunni Islam. Other faiths and forms of Islamic worship, such as the heterodox Alevi sect and officially banned but proliferating Sufi orders, coexisted in the shadows and gained adherents, including some politicians. In the 1980s, under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan, political parties with a clear Islamist bent began to make headway in elections, but were continually closed down by the courts, only to reopen under other names. Erdoğan, Gül, and other dissidents broke away from Erbakan's Welfare Party after his government was forced out in 1997, and in 2001 they founded the AKP, which they claimed was not Islamic, but rather a secular (not laicist) party run by pious Muslims. That is, Muslimhood was a personal attribute of individual politicians, not a party ideology. The party would make policy based on pragmatic considerations, not Islam. It aimed to represent all sectors of Turkish society. And for a time, it did.

In the mid-1980s, Prime Minister Turgut Özal had opened Turkey's economy to the world market, unleashing provincial entrepreneurs who had been left out of state-supported industrial development. These businessmen tended to be pious, and their newly acquired wealth and dominance in social and political networks led to the rise of an Islamic bourgeoisie. Under the AKP, they have developed alternative definitions of the nation and the citizen based on a post-Ottoman rather than a republican model.

Such changes have allowed the new pious elites to experiment with expressions of Muslimhood and national identity that would not have been possible before. Muslim nationalism is based on a cultural ideal of Turkishness, rather than blood-based Turkish ethnicity. It imagines the nation with more flexible Ottoman postimperial boundaries, instead of the historically embattled republican borders. The founding moment for this ideology is not the 1923 establishment of the nation-state, but the 1453 conquest of Constantinople by the Turks, which is reenacted, visually depicted in public places, and commemorated in festivities, sometimes displacing Kemalist national rituals.

This shift has created quite a different understanding of Turkish national interests, freeing the AKP to engage with Turkey's non-Muslim minori-

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ties, open borders to Arab states by waiving visa requirements, and make global alliances and pursue economic and political interests without concern for the ethnic identity of its interlocutors or the role they played in republican history—for instance, in relations with former enemies Greece and Armenia. When it was first elected, the AKP systematically began to break down military tutelage and reach out to non-Muslims and Kurds, returning confiscated properties and allowing use of previously banned non-Turkish languages. Erdoğan began to negotiate a peace deal with the Kurdish PKK, which the government classifies as a terrorist organization, after three decades of fighting and more than 40,000 dead.

The ban on three letters of the alphabet used in Kurdish—q, w, and x—was eliminated. Education in the Kurdish language was allowed in private institutions, though not in public ones. Place names of villages and regions were restored to their Kurdish or Alevi originals. Tunceli, for instance, would once again become Dersim, reminding everyone of the state massacre of Alevis that occurred there in the 1930s (Erdoğan blamed it on the secular, Kemalist Republican People's Party, which was in power at the time).

NEW IDENTITIES

Kemalism as a nationalist ideology has been pushed to the margins, although nationalism itself is alive and thriving in new forms. The concept of what it means to be Turkish, which was shaped by ideological indoctrination in schools, has become more malleable in recent years, up for reinterpretation in a marketplace of identities browsed by a burgeoning middle class that is young, globalized, and desires to be modern. For the first time in republican history, an Islamic identity is associated with upward mobility. Islam is a faith, but also a lifestyle choice with its own fashions, leisure options, musical styles, and media that mirror secular society. If they choose to work, pious young women can now find jobs and arenas of activism and professional development open to them, especially since the lifting of the headscarf ban.

The 2013 protests began in response to the government's attempt to turn Gezi Park, one of central Istanbul's last parks in a city with less than 2 percent public green space, into a mall. The police violently put down the protests, but instead

of making them fade away, this response provoked a spontaneous, nationwide series of mass demonstrations. Mostly young and secular, and including many women, the Gezi protesters are another product of the changes in Turkish society since the 1980s. They are global, playful, and consumerist. Turkishness is a personal attribute for them, just as the AKP suggested that Muslimhood was a personal attribute. They represent themselves, not an ideological position, a party, or a scheming foreign power. It was the first time in Turkish history that such masses of people—many with contradictory or competing interests—came together without any ideological or party organization.

The emergence of these new publics, even if only briefly, heralded an important step in Turkey's transformation away from twentieth-century values and incomplete political structures, toward a more tolerant democratic order and a civic nationalism based on citizenship rather than blood or group membership. But young people and women have little place in a political system dominated

by older males. They find outlets in a civil society and in the street, but are unlikely for at least the next decade to have an impact on the system that Erdoğan is consolidating under himself—unless that system changes dramatically

to permit independent voices, which at this juncture seems doubtful.

The rigidity of the political system is heightened by a widely shared majoritarian understanding of democracy in which the electoral winners get to determine what is allowed and what is banned in social life according to the norms of their community, with no room for nonconforming practices or ideas. This is true whether the issue is banning alcohol consumption or banning the veil. As Erdoğan told the Gezi protesters: If you don't agree with my decisions, win an election.

KURDISH CRISIS

In October, nationwide protests by Kurdish citizens broke out against the government's refusal to help protect the Kurdish town of Kobani, just across the border in Syria, against an ISIS onslaught. The protests turned violent, leaving 40 people dead. The reluctance to act reflected Turkish perceptions that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's survival and the strengthening of Kurdish nationalist aspirations in Syria are greater dangers

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to Turkey's national integrity than ISIS. The Turkish government (as well as many of its nationalist constituents who will be casting votes in the June 2015 general election) perceives the PKK as an existential threat, though Ankara is in peace talks with jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and on good terms with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PKK) in Iraq. Indeed, Iraqi Kurdistan has become a lucrative trade partner.

If Kobani falls, the peace negotiations may be a dead letter; but one could argue that they are already on life support. The PKK appears to be experiencing a struggle for supremacy between the still-popular Öcalan and top military commander Cemil Bayık. On Ankara's side, nationalist factions in government and the military may be pushing against any accommodation with the Kurds, while others advocate continuing the talks. In October, the negotiations were proceeding in Ankara at the same moment as Turkish planes were bombing PKK militants in eastern Turkey in retaliation for the killing of three soldiers.

Turkey sought to enlist a Syrian Kurdish group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), to help topple Assad, but was rebuffed. If there is to be an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria (which could benefit Turkey by buffering it from the Syrian war), Ankara would prefer that it not be run by the unpredictable PYD, an ally of the PKK. Ankara's recent decision to allow *peshmerga* fighters from Iraqi Kurdistan to cross into Kobani via Turkey, while rejecting international pressure to arm the PYD, is an awkward compromise. Turkey trusts the *peshmerga*, but Iraqi Kurds and the PYD/PKK are rivals for power, not friends.

Nevertheless, Turkey had to do something to avert another wave of refugees. In the first week after ISIS assaulted Kobani, 140,000 Syrians fled into Turkey in two days alone—a 10 percent increase in the refugee population of 1.4 million. Turkey feels it does not get enough international aid or respect for carrying this burden. Officials fear that any further influx, combined with rising unrest among the Kurds and increasing anti-refugee sentiment, could lead to major social instability. ISIS is a threat, but Ankara sees no good outcome from confronting it. The international coalition fighting ISIS seems to have no strategic goals to resolve the situation in Syria. Turkish public opinion outside of the Kurdish areas is strongly against involvement in Syria, and suspicion of the PKK is widespread. ISIS is fighting both Assad and the PYD, which seem to be the more immediate evils.

Turkey's broader foreign policy is in tatters, as illustrated in October by its humiliatingly decisive loss in a bid for a nonpermanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. The AKP's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, both considered threats by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states (with the exception of Qatar), Egypt, and other regimes in the region, has led not to a Sunni *Pax Ottomana*, but rather to an attenuation of diplomatic ties with these countries.

OPEN WOUNDS

Turkey is at a tipping point, held in the balance between those seeking to loosen the reins of heavy-handed paternalistic governance and those unsettled by the chaos of liberalism and desiring order and prosperity (the AKP demonized the Gezi protesters as hoodlums destroying property). Pulling the sectarian lever, however, nourishes extremism.

Within the new context of Muslim nationalism, these tensions have dangerous implications. ISIS penetration of Turkish borders is made possible partly because geographic boundaries in practice have become nearly irrelevant. Although Turkish opinion polls show widespread revulsion against ISIS, it could be argued that part of the population might be vulnerable to recruitment because boundaries of identity are also in flux. In the new post-Ottoman, globalized, commercialized environment of today's Turkey, a choosing Muslim does not have to see himself as a Turkish Muslim, and being a Turk no longer means being bounded by the borders of the nation-state. ISIS recruits are primed to embrace jihadist life by the deep structure of Turkish society, which requires obedience to a patriarchal hierarchy and submergence of selfhood, casting the citizen as self-sacrificing hero.

All of this is destabilizing Turkey internally, ripping open wounds that had partly healed after a decade of reforms. Those wounds are now vulnerable to infection by outside ideologies and actors. Erdoğan, in the meantime, is dismantling Turkey's checks and balances. Surrounded by yes-men, he has moved into his newly constructed thousand-room presidential palace in Ankara. Recently he railed against "those Lawrences" (of Arabia) in the Middle East who, he claimed, are trying to do again today what they did with the Treaty of Sèvres after World War I. Preoccupied with imagined enemies, Turkey's leader is blind to the real threat inside the gates. ■