

Turkey: Are Erdoğan's Days Numbered?

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It appears that the Islamic Gülenists and the secular Atatürkists — not friends in the past — have forged an alliance and are now ascendant.

Major political events have rocked the political scene in Turkey the past two weeks. Turkey's once seemingly-invincible prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, seems in a tailspin. A few days ago, he lashed out at U.S. Ambassador Frank Ricciardone and threatened to expel him from Turkey. Erdoğan claimed the Ambassador told other Western diplomats that the “empire [Erdoğan and his associates] is about to fall.[\[1\]](#)”

Clearly, Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's policy of “Zero Problems With Our Neighbors” — meaning the alliance with Turkey's Sunni-ruled Arab neighbors — has failed. Turkey now has problems with almost all its neighbors. It appears that the Gülenists and the Atatürkists — not friends in the past — are now ascendant. It is unlikely that they, or whoever might take over in Turkey, would want to continue this failed approach.

Long-brewing political struggles within the ruling AK party have also surfaced. They boil down to two radically different views of Islam. In the first, Erdoğan's faction identifies and allies itself with the [Arab] Muslim Brotherhood. This faction was strongly supportive of the ousted Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood President Muhammad Morsi and also of Syria's fundamentalists. In the second view, supporters of the Fethullah Gülen look down upon “Arab Islam.” To them, “real” Islam is “the Islam of the Turks – meaning the people who live in Turkey, Central Asia, and Western China.”[\[2\]](#) [\[3\]](#)

To the outsider, these differences might seem to be distinctions without differences: supporters of both views understandably want Islam to be a major part of the political order. But for Turks, these differences are seismic: the question is, do they belong to the Middle Eastern Arab and Muslim political camp, or do they belong to the wider Turkish world?

Since Erdoğan and his fellow Islamic fundamentalists took power in 2002, Gülen and his forces have been in the background, building prep-schools and propagating their version of Islam — in Turkey, in the Turkic world, and also in America. It is not surprising that when Gülen faced legal difficulties in Turkey[\[4\]](#) in 1999, he fled to the U.S., ostensibly for medical treatment, apparently still ongoing.[\[5\]](#)

On May 31, 2010, Erdoğan's government backed and encouraged a flotilla of Turkish ships supposedly to bring needed supplies to the Gaza Strip, ruled by their fellow Muslim Brotherhood fundamentalists, Hamas. Gülen may have seen this as an opportunity indirectly publicly to chastise Erdoğan. In an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal* [\[6\]](#), Gülen argued that as Israel legitimately controlled the waters off Gaza, the flotilla should have asked for Israel's permission to land there. Gülen did not criticize Erdoğan directly; people rarely criticize others directly in Turkey. But culturally, his choice of words indicated to Turks that he was blaming Erdoğan for creating the crisis.

Gülen has not been known to be supportive of the Jews, nor for that matter of the U.S. or the West.[\[7\]](#) But now in his battle is evidently to ensure that Turkish Islam defeats the so-called

Arab-Muslim Brotherhood type of Islam supported by Erdoğan, the Jews and the West might well seem useful allies. As many Middle Easterners say, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” A friendship, or alliance, might be temporary, but may continue as long as required.[8] Earlier this year, the enmity between Erdoğan and Gülen broke out into the open, evidently ignited by Turkey’s Gezi Park protests — weeks of riots and demonstrations against the Turkish prime minister[9]. Erdoğan encountered enormous difficulty putting them down; in so doing, he alienated large sections of Turkey’s population. Gülenists, active in this uprising[10], possibly discerning political weakness, may well have used that crisis as an opportunity to try to defeat their opponents.

Perhaps in revenge, Erdoğan — often quick to respond emotionally[11] — proposed laws to ban *dershane* [prep-schools], the bread and butter of the Gülen movement, and where Gülen recruits followers, who later become the political and financial backbone of his movement.[12] For the Gülenists, Erdoğan’s proposed ban appears to have been the decisive provocation.

Since Gülen’s self-imposed exile, his supporters, well-placed throughout the Turkish bureaucracy, have continued to provide him with extensive influence inside the Turkish police and judiciary, and are believed also to have infiltrated the secret services, law enforcement offices and even the AK party itself.[13]

Gülen’s supporters responded to this proposed ban by arresting 52 members of Erdoğan’s closest associates, including sons of two of his cabinet ministers, and charging them with corruption. According to rumors circulating in Turkey, some of Erdoğan’s relatives are also involved in the plot ; the facts are still unclear.[14] The central figure in this corruption scandal is an Iranian Azeri, Reza Zarrab — married to a popular Turkish singer — who was illegally trading with Iran. Zarrab is charged with bribing the sons of the Turkish ministers — some of Erdoğan’s closest associates.

At the same time, the Israeli national airline, El Al, announced that, after a six-year hiatus, it would resume flights to Turkey. Apparently the Turkish government had been refusing to let Israel observe the flight security procedures it follows everywhere else in the world,[15] but out of nowhere, Turkey seems suddenly to have acceded to Israel’s security demands.

Further, the judiciary released from jail the retired General Çevik Bir, who had been strong advocate of U.S.-Turkish-NATO relations. Bir had been the central figure in the “February 28 Plot” — evidently dreamed up by Erdoğan and his associates as a means of finding some legal ground for which to prosecute opponents. Bir, it was claimed, was the central figure of this alleged plot, allegedly hatched by the Generals of National Security Council, to overthrow the Islamist government of Erdoğan’s mentor, Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan.

Bir was also one of the major architects of the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement in the 1990s, and a strong opponent of Fethullah Gülen, whom he apparently saw as an Islamic fundamentalist and a long-term danger to Turkey’s secular and democratic Atatürkist Republic. Because of Bir’s outspoken animosity against the Islamists, which included the powerful Gülen, Bir seems to have been an important factor in Gülen’s decision to flee the country.

So why was Bir — an opponent of Gülen — released by a heavily Gülenist judiciary? Although the reasons behind Bir’s release are not yet clear, as an opponent of the Erdoğan government, however, he could now be an ally of Gülen.

Where Turkey’s once highly influential military stands is unclear. So far, it has been silent. It has historically been — and its senior officers still are — steeped in the Atatürkist secular and pro-Western tradition. At least for the moment, the Islamist Gülenists[16] seem to have forged an alliance of convenience with Turkey’s secularists. The beneficiaries of this political upheaval could well be the West, the U.S., NATO, and Israel. Stay tuned.

Notes

[1] [“Erdoğan implies US ambassador to be expelled”](#), *Today’s Zaman*.

[2] For a further explanation of the differences between these two Islamist factions, see Harold Rhode, [“Mapping Political Islam in Turkey”](#).

[3] We in the West use the word “Turkish” as an adjective to describe Turkey, and “Turkic” to describe Turks in today’s Russia, the Central Asian Republics, and in Xinjiang, China. Nevertheless, there is a feeling that despite their differences, all of these peoples emanate from one people, and are like close family. From their point of view, Non-Turkish and non-Turkic Muslims are not part of the “family.”

[4] See, [“Fethullah Gülen’s Grand Ambition”](#), Rachel Sharon Krespin, and [“Turkish investigation into Islamic sect expanded”](#), *BBC News*. 21 June 1999.

[5] [“U.S. charter schools tied to powerful Turkish imam”](#). *60 Minutes*, CBS News, May 13, 2012.

[6] [“Reclusive Turkish Imam Criticizes Gaza Flotilla”](#), *Wall Street Journal*.

[7] From personal interviews with students educated in Gülen schools in Turkey and Central Asia, his people look for potential supporters from among their students. Those selected are invited to “sohbetler” [“conversations”] where anti-American/Western, anti-Christian, and anti-Semitic views are often propagated, but kept private not to jeopardize political support abroad.

[8] This is similar to the “alliance” at present between Israel and many Sunni leaders — especially the Saudis, and the Gulf States – who oppose Shiite Iran. After “regime change” in Iran, it remains to be seen how long this “alliance” will last. Similarly, after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, until America liberated Kuwait, the Saudis and Kuwaitis maintained relationships with Jewish groups in Western capitals. The day Kuwait was liberated, the Saudis and Kuwaitis severed virtually all contact with these Jewish leaders.

[9] For more on these riots and demonstrations, see, [“Turkish police storm protest camp using teargas and rubber bullets”](#), *The Guardian*.

[10] This is from conversations with Gülenists throughout the country at that time.

[11] Public examples of these emotional outbursts are many. To cite just two: In June, 2009, Erdoğan lashed out at Israeli President Shimon Peres, calling Israelis killers. Earlier this year, when the Gezi Park demonstrations took place, he labeled the participants “Çapulcus” – low-life good for nothings.

[12] [“Draft law aims to ban all prep schools, punish if necessary”](#), *Today’s Zaman*.

[13] [“Fethullah Gulen: Is Islamic Cleric in Self-Exile Behind Turkey? More arrests as power struggle racks Erdogan government in Turkey”](#), CNN.com

[15] [“Israeli airlines to resume flights to Turkey after six-year hiatus”](#), *The Jerusalem Post*

[16] For a detailed study of Gülen’s Turkish/Turkic Islam, see [“Fethullah Gulen and His Liberal ‘Turkish Islam’ Movement”](#), *GLORIA.s High-Profile Arrests?*, International Business Times

[14] “