



ERDOĞAN'S DECADE

Has the Justice and Development Party Changed Turkish Politics Forever?

By Hugh Pope

The swirling currents of daily political life in Turkey enjoy a wild unpredictability. But in November 2002, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP) swept to power with surprising strength, it turned out that it was riding one of Turkey's regular underlying tides. This sudden popular reversal was much the same as in 1950 when a similar surge of votes brought Adnan Menderes and the Democrat Party to power. And it happened again in 1983 in favor of Turgut Özal and the Motherland Party. On each of these three occasions, the new leader catching the public imagination was charismatic, pragmatic, and able to gather round him a coalition of interests including conservative landowners, progressive businessmen, Turkish nationalists, Kurds, the pious, a scattering of liberals, and a bedrock of skepticism about Turkey's secularist ideology and its military enforcers. The stars of Menderes and Özal both faded after ten years, during which time they became more autocratic and began to rely on an ever-narrowing circle of advisers. Erdoğan, perhaps the most effective leader of them all, reaches his tenth anniversary in November.

It was not immediately obvious that Erdoğan would emerge as such a national leader. A graduate of an imam and preacher-training school, he had risen through the youth wing of the implicitly pro-Islamist and usually marginal movement led by veteran politician Necmettin Erbakan. Erdoğan's opportunity arrived in 1994, when divisions in Turkey's political system and his own campaigning energy secured him the mayor's seat in Istanbul, Turkey's cultural and commercial capital, with just one quarter of the vote. His split with the Erbakan movement came in 2001, when he and the movement's pragmatic wing realized they needed mass appeal if they were ever to win national elections. And in 2002,

◁ Prime Minister
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
with Turkish military
officers, Ankara,
July 29, 2011.
*Adem Altan/AFP/
Getty Image*

Erdoğan benefited from a general sense of popular fatigue with squabbling old-school politicians in a country still reeling from a major economic crisis. Add to the mix the fact that he and his party offered something plausible and new, and Erdoğan enjoyed a similar confluence of circumstances that had allowed newcomers Menderes and Özal their surprise victories in 1950 and 1983.

The jury is still out on the achievements of the AKP's first decade. Great successes marked the early years—waves of reforms, the opening of EU accession negotiations, the end of torture in jails, strong economic expansion, and more improvements for ethnic Kurds than any previous government. But the AKP has fumbled important policies, often following failures of its own political will. Cyprus remains unsolved; a great wedge between Turkey and the EU. The Armenian genocide question, at one time at the gate of a path to resolution, is once again an arena of growing friction. And the Kurdish problem, in the process of being resolved in 2009, has fallen back into armed conflict. Domestic critics see the similar corrosive effects of absolute power on the AKP, with thousands of Turks being detained and hundreds held for years on controversial grounds of “terrorism.” These are mostly Turkish Kurd activists, but also include nationalists, soldiers, university students, academics, and journalists.

As with the Menderes and Özal parties before it, the fate of the AKP is above all linked to Prime Minister Erdoğan. Some people say they voted for the tall, broad-shouldered ex-mayor just because of the confident swagger in his stride; others saw him as a scary product of his former pro-Islamic party. There was radical fire enough in a poem read out by Erdoğan in 1997 to cost him his job as Istanbul mayor and provoke a temporary ban from politics: ‘The mosques are our barracks, / The domes our helmets, / The minarets our bayonets, / And the believers our soldiers.’ But the poem was actually written by Turkish nationalist panegyrist Ziya Gökalp (who died in 1924) and Erdoğan’s ability to win 34 percent of the vote in 2002 proved that ordinary Turks had accepted Erdoğan as a solid manager of Istanbul, not as a scary fundamentalist.

Indeed, during the campaign, Erdoğan told visitors to the AKP’s headquarters that he simply wanted to be known as a conservative and explicitly stated that he had broken with his radical Islamist past. “That period is over, finished,” he said, in his sometimes brusque style. “We have opened a new page with a new group of people, a brand new party . . . we were anti-European. Now we’re pro-European.” When challenged over past statements such as “my reference is Islam,” however, Erdoğan retained an element of the old ambivalence of the Islamist underground. “Islam is a religion; democracy is a way of ruling. You can’t compare the two. We just want to increase the happiness of the people,” he said. Secularists remained nervous that a new, Islamist ideology would take the place of their own. None missed

an opportunity to recall that Erdoğan had once cynically compared democracy to “catching a train. When you get to your station, you get off.”

‘Brother Tayyip’

Erdoğan had already come a long way from his Istanbul origins in a working-class neighborhood whose proud men are a by-word in Turkey for rejecting any compromise as an unacceptable loss of face. Joining Turkey’s Islamist movement as a youth, Erdoğan and later his wife Emine were responsible for consolidating the party’s vote-winning infantry in the city. As much as the policies, it was Erdoğan’s control of this organization, and an obsession for opinion polls and market surveys, that was to bring him success in 2002 and keep his share of the vote above 50 percent in 2011. By this time, Erdoğan was able to send his children to U.S. universities—his daughters supposedly so they could wear their headscarves (legally banned although tolerated on Turkish campuses) but he never wanted anyone to think he had forgotten his origins. “In this country, there is a segregation of Black Turks and White Turks,” Erdoğan once said. “Your brother Tayyip belongs to the Black Turks.”

Erdoğan’s first big test as AKP prime minister was the run-up to, and fall-out from, the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq. As so often in Turkey, the AKP’s instincts vacillated between alignment with the West, Christian and disdainful yet rich and strong; and sympathy for the Middle East, poorer and traumatized by conflicts, but fellow Muslims and neighbors. Initially, Erdoğan promised to cooperate with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in return for the promise of an extensive Turkish say in the future of northern Iraq plus billions of dollars in grant aid and loans. But the Americans didn’t read the complex politics of Turkey correctly, and even Erdoğan underestimated the strength of opposition to U.S. plans within his own party. On March 1, 2003, more than a quarter of his deputies declined to enter the assembly or voted against Turkish cooperation with the Iraq invasion. AKP leaders were left ashen-faced as they discovered they were three deputies short of the necessary parliamentary quorum. The measure was defeated.

There was no easy going back and Erdoğan had to embrace what he called a “democratic outcome.” Polls showed 94 percent of Turks opposed the war, because, like Europeans and others around the world, they did not believe that Iraq was responsible for the September 11, 2001, attacks on America, and they feared intervention would further destabilize the Middle East, hurt the Turkish economy, encourage ethnic Kurdish separatism, and fuel radicalism in the region. Not surprisingly, U.S. leaders were furious at being jilted just a couple of weeks before the planned outbreak of hostilities, not just by the AKP but by lukewarm Turkish generals too. American supply ships waiting off the Turkish coast had to sail to the Persian Gulf, their advance units had to reload what they had unloaded at Turkish ports, and troops had to leave

outposts already established along the Turkish highway to northern Iraq—in one televised instance, pelted with stones by local people.

Thanks to the initial success and brevity of the military campaign, the AKP escaped the full force of U.S. opprobrium. Erdoğan rushed to make up by granting overflight rights, offering troops (in the event rejected by Iraq's new authority), and opening up supply routes for the new U.S. occupation forces in Iraq. In 2007, Turkey and the U.S. signed a deal that saw Ankara normalize relations with Iraqi Kurds and secure U.S. intelligence in its fight against Turkish Kurd insurgents. Indeed, by 2011, the U.S. increasingly treated Turkey as a key regional partner as it moved back from engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, leading President Abdullah Gül to call this period a 'golden age' in relations with Washington.

The mid-2000s had not been smooth sailing for the AKP, however. The new party needed allies as it faced bitter opposition from the Kemalists within the bureaucracy and military, the staunch followers of republican founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which proved the basis for many later investigations of alleged coup plots. Showing their pragmatic ability to seize an opportunity, Erdoğan and Gül sought national inspiration and political protection by embracing the troubled convergence process with the European Union. Shortly after his party's first electoral victory in 2002, Erdoğan set off on a whirlwind tour of European capitals. The athletic, then-forty-eight-year-old Erdoğan's performance made a sharp contrast with his geriatric predecessor, Bülent Ecevit. European counterparts were impressed by Erdoğan's direct approach and relieved by his reformist program. He also received red carpet treatment in Greece, where he followed up on the 1999 rapprochement with Athens and promised a new start regarding Cyprus, complete with new and strong support for the reunification of the island.

Divorcing the EU

Erdoğan and the AKP continued with revolutionary reforms enacted by Ankara since the 1999 recognition of Turkey as an EU membership candidate. The secularist coalition of Prime Minister Ecevit had already rewritten one-third of the Turkish constitution by adopting international human rights laws, ending capital punishment, expanding women's rights, discouraging torture, and improving prison conditions. New laws curtailed existing restrictions on freedom of expression, civil society, and the media, as well as diminishing the Turkish military's long-standing dominance of politics. The AKP followed this with several further packages of EU reforms passed in 2003–4, which expanded Kurdish cultural rights, brought a level of transparency to the army budget, and restricted the executive power of the National Security Council. The NSC was not merely a parallel government where top civilian and military

officials hammered out Turkish national policy, but an entire military-dominated apparatus with a 600-man secretariat that monitored sensitive areas of the administration and had eyes in all state institutions. Pushing ever further, Erdoğan announced in 2012 that the 'national security' lesson in schools would end.

This reforming trend and the signed promise of increased normalcy with Cyprus finally won Turkey its October 3, 2005 date to begin EU membership negotiations. Nevertheless, at the December 2004 European Council where this was decided, the Dutch premier of the day didn't receive any gratitude or back-slapping bear hugs that marked the elated reactions of other Balkan states accorded the same green light. Indeed, there is a deep ambivalence in Turkey towards the EU. Polls typically show a roughly 60 percent majority of Turks supporting membership but only 40 percent believe that it will actually happen. Ironically, only about 40 percent of people in the EU can accept the idea of Turkish membership although 60 percent believe Turkey will get it anyway. On one hand, the digestive power of the EU went to work as ministries modernized floor by floor and EU standards and regulations crept into Turkish law across a broad front from motor vehicle tests to snack stand environmental rules. But on the other hand, a Turkish artist portrayed the process in a short video set in a workshop where a worker in blue overalls steadily stone grinds a hard, pointed piece of metal. As the flying sparks die away at the end, the metal turns out to be the crescent moon of the Turkish flag, its spiky point rounded off, and, by implication, now an impotent symbol, curbed by new masters in Brussels.

Ankara still insists on its long-promised right to join. But almost no Turkish leader, questioned privately, says they would immediately sign membership treaties if and when the country fulfils all the necessary criteria. President Gül has repeatedly said that Turkey might prefer the Norwegian option, being able to join but choosing not to do so. Indeed, Turkey continues to block Greek Cypriot access to Turkish ports, thereby casting a pall over an accession process that has only thickened over the years. By the end of the AKP's second term in office in June 2011, only thirteen chapters had been opened and one provisionally closed, and all but the rest had been blocked. The membership process had come to a virtual standstill.

Erdoğan and the AKP have blamed Europe for the slowdown. And, indeed, the old continent's right wing governments, populist parties, economic slowdown, and loss of formerly expansive confidence have had a gravely depressing effect. The pro-Turkey EU leaders who swung the 2004 European Council in favor of accession talks were gradually replaced. But most damaging was the 2007 election of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who chose to win votes via direct attacks on the EU-Turkey process. This short-term appeal to French anti-immigration sentiment was both a breach of France's treaty commitments and a blow to France's long-term commercial interests. It triggered

an emotional response in Turkey, where early republicanism was self-consciously modeled on France's Jacobin revolutionary heritage and secularist ideology. Even if the previous EU-Turkey process could be compared to a game in which Turkey pretended to join and the EU pretended to accept it, Sarkozy's determination to walk out on the deal effected a rupture that had all the atmospherics of an acrimonious divorce.

However, Erdoğan and the AKP must also take their share of the blame for the deterioration of ties with Europe. They voluntarily chose not to enact the partial normalization with the Republic of Cyprus required of them, later citing the EU's failure to implement some lesser promise. There were also other signs of an underlying lack of Turkish enthusiasm for going all the way to EU-mandated transparency in government, decentralization of power, and freedom of expression. Until 2009, the chief Turkish EU negotiator was also a busy foreign minister. Turkey's EU General Secretariat, in charge of coordinating the adoption of EU laws, was under staffed and under funded. Talk of enacting the National Program for adopting those laws dragged out for more than a year before it was enacted in 2008. The blunt Erdoğan showed little aptitude for bonding with the less-colorful and softer-spoken EU leaders while his grandstanding style made them wonder how he would ever fit into the collegial atmosphere of European Council meetings. EU officials bristled at their frequent clashes with Turkish counterparts who kept negotiations on edge until the last minute, were unable to make decisions on their own, and whose uncompromising maximalism often made Turkey look as if it wanted to have its cake and to eat it too.

Generals and Headscarves

The EU process did, however, give the AKP cover as it saw off the biggest threat to its rule, the Turkish armed forces. The Turkish general staff had gritted its teeth as AKP took power in 2002 and avoided attending official receptions where Turkey's new leaders were accompanied by their headscarfed wives. Their implicit insubordination had an intimidating effect, following as it did the witch-hunts against anyone with pro-Islamic tendencies after the 1997 ousting of Necmettin Erbakan's Refah Party. In 2009, when the AKP felt firmly in charge, prosecutors discovered what they said was a web of coup conspiracies organized by a deep state group they called *Ergenekon* and arrested large numbers of senior officers. It is doubtful whether the plotting was quite as widespread as some in the AKP thought. But for sure, the secularist officer corps was seething with resentment against what they saw as a political force determined to undo Atatürk's secularist legacy. And leaked documents and testimony do indicate discussions and conspiracies against the government from 2003 onwards.

As it became clear that the AKP was intending to nominate one of its leaders, Abdullah Gül, to become president in early 2007, the chief of the general staff began

dropping critical hints. A group, including retired officers, started organizing pro-secularist demonstrations. These drew hundreds of thousands in western cities, and serving generals even circulated propaganda by email to urge on the movement. On April 27, 2007, parliament held the first round of the presidential election and Gül did not get the necessary two-thirds majority. The same evening the general staff published on its website a memorandum warning that it was “a party to these debates and the definitive defender of secularism” and that it would “if necessary, openly display its reaction.” Five days later, on May 1, another Kemalist stronghold, the Constitutional Court, found in favor of an application to annul the election on the grounds of a hitherto unknown quorum technicality claimed by the secularist and opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP).

After this public threat from the general staff, some AKP leaders and sympathizers packed small suitcases, ready to be led off to jail the next morning. But Turkey had changed, and Erdoğan, Gül, and the AKP did not lose their nerve. They brought parliamentary elections forward from November to July and, faced with a choice between the AKP and the military, the Turkish people voted massively for the AKP. On July 22, 2007, the people gave the ruling party 46.6 percent of the vote; thirteen points ahead of its 2002 performance. The pro-military CHP trailed with 20.9 percent. On August 28, 2007, the new parliament duly elected Gül as president and his wife, Hayrünnisa, became Turkey’s first ‘first lady’ to wear a headscarf.

For several months, military top brass continued to boycott official ceremonies, sometimes with considerable rudeness. There was, however, no question that the military had been forced back to its barracks. The army had been able to meddle so much in Turkey’s military-dominated past because, when politicians were so obviously unpopular, generals could plausibly present themselves as the voice of the silent majority. But a conscript army could not be mobilized against a political party that had won nearly half of the national vote. Gradually the system adapted: it helped that Gül was always engagingly polite and cultivated a moderate and statesmanlike image. People became more used to seeing the headscarfed wives of the AKP elite, some of whom, like the wife of the first AKP foreign minister, Ali Babacan, dressed as elegantly as fairy-tale princesses.

Despite this, the AKP has been unable to overcome a deepening, almost tribal polarization between the secularist and pious, religious tendencies within society. This split was worsened by both the AKP’s attitude that its parliamentary majority gave it and it alone the right to decide what was best for the country, and the opposition’s stubbornly zero-sum mentality that its popularity would be damaged if it allowed the AKP to succeed in anything. The opposition refused to discuss cooperation on a new constitution after 2007—essentially, the AKP’s primary election pledge—and

it did little to help the AKP's 2009 initiative to reach out to Turkey's Kurds. High society Istanbul dinner parties often divided into viscerally angry debates in which liberals would defend the AKP's performance and secularists would decry the AKP's infringements of old Atatürkist norms. This could often seem like class war. After all, the AKP represented a newly-urbanized majority descended from villagers and small-town merchants, while the secularists represented the old elite whose grandparents, refugees from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, had taken over Anatolian towns and built the Turkish republic from the 1920s.

Kurds and other Conundrums

One successful novelty of the early AKP years was a broadening détente on the Kurdish problem, although it remained slow, imperfect, and marred with continued outbreaks of violence and injustice. In the parliamentary elections of November 2002, the explicitly Kurdish nationalist party won 6.2 percent of the countrywide vote, but because it failed to exceed the national barrier of 10 percent, it received no seats in parliament. The party was banned for alleged links to separatist terrorism in 2005 and in 2007 its successor chose to run its candidates as independents, enough of whom won seats to qualify as a twenty-deputy party bloc in parliament. Kurdish nationalist politicians were enjoying long terms in power in many municipalities in the southeast, becoming more of a working cog in the political system and more responsive to civil needs. Indeed, generally lower levels of violence, in addition to the AKP's enlightened development and road-building policies and rising levels of prosperity in Turkey as a whole, transformed the face of Kurdish-majority cities, with their new apartment buildings, shopping centers, and neater, greener urban spaces. In 2009, as part of what became known as the 'Democratic Opening,' a twenty-four-hour Kurdish language state television channel went on air, local Kurdish broadcasters were allowed to broadcast in Kurdish, a first attempt was made to bring Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) guerrillas home to benefit from an amnesty, and universities were permitted to register Kurdish language and literature courses.

Progress was, however, too slow and insincere to satisfy Kurdish nationalists. They had to struggle every day against legal Turkish harassment and social prejudice in order to win more respect and political representation. During the first two years of the supposed 'Democratic Opening' (2009–11), for instance, the state jailed, for various periods, more than 3,000 nationalist political activists, not for any acts of violence but almost all on the presumption that they sympathized with or spoke about one of the policies attributed to the PKK.

The PKK had already withdrawn the ceasefire it had announced in 1999, saying that state forces hadn't backed off. The late 2000s were increasingly characterized by

a cat-and-mouse game of clashes and further ceasefires. During upswings of violence, PKK insurgents ambushed outlying conscript-manned army outposts and lay roadside bombs for passing convoys, while radical offshoots would sometimes stage terrorist attacks in the hearts of major western Turkish cities or against tourists on Mediterranean beaches. For its part, the Turkish military would hunt insurgent units high in the mountains and conduct aerial bombardments of their bases in northern Iraq, sometimes followed up by land incursions. Extravagant Kurdish political shows of support for the PKK or funerals of Turkish soldiers killed in lethal clashes caused peaks of nationalist outrage that put pressure on the government and hindered all attempts at political dialogue. The situation had unraveled so far that, by the second half of 2011, fighting and bombings killed more than 300 members of the security forces, PKK fighters, and civilians. In the main Kurdish city of Diyarbakır, a general sense of a happier, tidier, more prosperous normalcy seemed to co-exist with outbreaks of mayhem. Yet at the same time, a PKK funeral could trigger a mass strike by shopkeepers, running battles in the outskirts of town between the Turkish police and Kurdish youths armed with knives, firecrackers, and Molotov cocktails while the police fired pistols in the air, released tear gas into crowds, and photographed participants for later arrest. Turks in the west of the country repeatedly failed to understand the Kurds' need for dignity and national recognition, to feel Kurdish pain as the bodies of PKK guerrillas were brought home for burial, or the growing anger, energy, and mobilization of the new and still-dispossessed generation of Kurdish youth.

During its early years, the AKP managed to keep the support of western Turkish liberals, who accepted that pragmatism outweighed its religious leanings and shared its skeptical approach to the old-school statism of the Kemalists. AKP leaders had split with the pro-Islamist movement in 2001, and if they retained any Islamist agenda, it was unstated and relatively subtle. Some Anatolian regions resembled those provincial U.S. towns that banish liquor to brown bags bought at stores on the outskirts, acquired alcohol prices of almost Swedish levels in relative terms, and saw moralistic laws soft-focus cigarettes and alcohol out of television shows. But the first years of AKP rule also saw a blossoming of the open air restaurant and cafe culture in many cities, a boom in Russian and European tourism, and a phenomenal expansion of small enterprises manufacturing higher quality wine and spirits. Erdoğan's attempt in 2007 to revert to the pre-1998 criminalization of adultery in Turkey, apparently on religious grounds, foundered not just on European disapproval but also on domestic outcry.

Liberals were gradually alienated, which brought more votes for the opposition in western coastal cities and led to the AKP's loss in the 2009 municipal elections of the booming Mediterranean tourist resort city of Antalya. And, the AKP did not root out the judiciary's authoritarian habits. At one point after the 2009 launch of the *Ergenekon*

complex of court cases, more than 10 percent of serving generals and admirals were behind bars for supposed military and deep state coup plotting. The prosecutors clearly went too far, rounding up octogenarian activists, leaking evidence that appeared fraudulent, and jailing one well-known secularist Ankara commentator, Mustafa Balbay, for more than two years without informing him of the charges against him. Turkish Kurds and other dissidents fared no better. As happens too often in Turkey, the judicial system judged intention as action, mistook smoke for fire, confused sympathy with rebel causes for criminal anti-state revolt, and locked up many people on the presumption of guilt as an inefficient judicial process limped along for years until, as everyone knew was likely, many of the suspects would be found innocent.

Early on, the AKP tried hard to settle chronic foreign policy problems. One notable effort concerned Turkey's long-standing differences with Armenia and the Armenian diaspora. Years of secret contact, civil society interaction, and then open negotiations resulted in two protocols being signed in October 2009. These formed a framework for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia and the opening of their mutual border, closed by Turkey in 1993. At the same time, the two sides agreed to establish joint official commissions, including one with participation from Swiss experts, to study their disputed history—principally the question of how to agree on the underlying facts and denomination of what the world calls the genocide of 1.5 million Armenians, and what Turkey increasingly accepts as tragic wartime massacres of several hundred thousand. In parallel, Turkey harbored an unspoken hope that the Armenians would withdraw from some of the 13.5 percent of Azerbaijan that they occupied in the 1992–4 war that conquered Azerbaijan's Armenian-majority enclave of Nagorno Karabagh. Unfortunately, the two protocols stalled in late 2009 when strong objections were raised by Azerbaijan—a major Turkish energy supplier, trading partner, and ethnic cousin. To a lesser extent, the Armenian diaspora and opposition were uncomfortable with any compromise towards Turkey, and most Armenians opposed any explicit link to Armenian withdrawals from conquered territories around the Karabagh mountains. As often seems to happen, the breakdown was not a result of any bad intentions of the AKP, but rather an apparent inability to think through the need to stick by new policies when the political going got tough.

Despite this setback, Armenian and Turkish civil groups and media have stayed in regular contact. Journalist exchanges, cultural events, small business, and even the delivery of transit passes to Armenian truck drivers driving through Turkey have kept pushing normalization forward. The road has been bumpy, including the infamous 2005 prosecution of Turkey's leading writer Orhan Pamuk for 'denigrating Turkishness' by referring to the killings of Armenians and Kurds. That charge was dropped on a technicality in 2006, the year that Pamuk won the Nobel Prize for Literature. But

by 2011, the debate had moved on so far that it was unremarkable to find, for instance, a progressive Turkish newspaper commentary drawing the conclusion that the 1915 massacres “may not be a genocide in [legalistic] words, but that’s what they were in essence.” These “massacres” were commemorated for the second year running in 2011 across Turkey, including Istanbul’s Taksim Square.

The AKP also failed to clear up another legacy of the past: the well-grounded suspicions regarding the deep state’s failure to deal, in a timely manner, with attacks against non-Muslim minorities. A Catholic priest, Andreas Santoro, was murdered in Trabzon in 2006 and three Christian missionaries had their throats slit in Malatya in April 2007. The Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, who was once convicted for ‘denigrating Turkishness’ on the basis of mistranslated articles, was assassinated in January 2007. His death shook the country, as did credible allegations of official involvement with the teenage nationalist who murdered him. Tens of thousands of people poured into the streets to demonstrate their solidarity with the slain writer. But rather than giving justice to the victims’ families and reforming the intolerant xenophobia of the media and education systems, which underlie these murders, the passing years and eventual court ruling in January 2012, which allowed most of the accused to walk free, points to official indulgence of, and indeed complicity with, the perpetrators.

As the army became less of a threat and liberal support appeared dispensable, the AKP gradually lost interest in Europe and EU norms, and slowed reforms that would have brought greater transparency, accountability, competition, and open markets, and limited the government’s power to distribute patronage. Indeed, it was now the secularists who needed to seize the banner of EU-bound reform, something they failed to immediately appreciate. Even high-ranking Turkish officials became scornful of the way several member states’ economies faltered after the 2008 financial crisis, the euro came under attack, and deep political fault-lines made the EU look confused and ineffective. Turkey, by contrast, helped by a recapitalized and better-regulated banking sector, rebounded rapidly from the initial crisis and appeared to have escaped the contagion. So it was perhaps not surprising that Erdoğan and the AKP turned to the altogether more congenial goal of becoming a champion in its region, particularly in the Middle East, a goal that appeared to neatly serve Turkey’s commercial as well as strategic interests.

Managing the ‘New Middle East’

At first, AKP leaders actively compared their new outreach to the Middle East with the EU’s beginnings and championed benefits derived from the freedom of movement for people, trade, capital, and services. They explicitly aimed, like Europeans after World War II, to integrate and reduce confrontation between neighbors traumatized

by decades of revolution, sanctions, and war. The policy has hints of political ambition, not to mention Turkish preeminence, but this neo-Ottoman flavor did not, at first, put off Turkey's regional partners. Ankara's first step was to ease travel restrictions and lift visa requirements for travelers from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Libya in 2009, thereby adding to the already automatic system of granting visas to Iranians. A new border crossing was inaugurated with Syria, and Cold War-era minefields were removed between the two countries. Groups of senior cabinet ministers began to hold regular joint meetings, as the AKP had done with other neighbors such as Greece and Russia. And in 2010, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan agreed to transform their bilateral free trade areas into a jointly-managed free trade zone, a first step towards an EU-style multilateral mechanism.

At the same time, Turkey became an observer at the Arab League and hosted foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Istanbul. In 2005, a Turk, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, won the first contested election to lead the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which includes representatives from fifty-seven Muslim countries; it's worth noting too that in 2010 a Turk was also elected to head the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Alongside its civilian and military contributions to North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Afghan and Balkan efforts, Turkey also began contributing ships and 1,000 military personnel and engineers to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Broad regional support elevated Turkey to a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council for 2009–10, the first time since the early 1960s.

Middle Easterners are finding Turkey more attractive for many reasons. The AKP's victory had buried the image of a country long seen as having turned its back on Islam to act as a treacherous cat's paw for Western imperialism in the region. Some prized Turkey's readiness to challenge Israel openly, arguably the main reason for Turkey's appeal on Arab streets when it became a pronounced Turkish trait after 2009. Turkey also appears to have made peace between its Muslim soul and secular political pragmatism. Some Middle Easterners respect its status as the only Muslim country to be accepted as a potential equal by rich, powerful Europe, as shown by the hundreds of journalists from the region who attended key EU meetings on Turkey's future membership. Some like its success in moving from authoritarianism to democracy. Some simply admire the pure electoral legitimacy of Turkish leaders—and readiness to step down from power at the end of their terms.

The AKP has also presided over a period of unprecedented economic and commercial success. After the restructuring that followed a 2000–1 domestic financial crisis, global buoyancy helped Turkey streak ahead. Annual growth averaged 7 percent for the AKP's early years in office, between 2002 and 2007. Inflation tumbled

from an average of 75 percent in the 1990s to 9.5 percent in 2009. Exports quadrupled from \$36.1 billion in 2002 to \$132 billion in 2008. Foreign investment, which had lingered around \$1–2 billion per year for decades, soared to \$5.8 billion in 2005 and then averaged about \$20 billion for the next three years. In the short term, at least, Turkey's cleaned-up banking system and relative freedom from mortgage-backed debt allowed it to escape the worst of the 2008–9 global downturn. There is likely to be an adjustment in store for the Turkish economy in 2012, not just because of the slowdown in its main markets in Europe, but because uprisings in the Arab world will likely cause years of tumult and lower economic demand.

The AKP has endured some criticism for the way its ambitious intentions led to embracing unsavory Middle Eastern dictators, who were then disgraced by the 2011 Arab revolts. Nevertheless, in the long term, the AKP's early proactive and even-handed diplomacy in the region retains the potential to encourage peace and stability, without which prosperity and democracy are unlikely to take root. The streets of Turkish cities and seaside resorts are audibly more filled with visitors from Iran and the Arab world than previously. At the same time, Turkish capital, films, television series, music, and products are establishing themselves in Middle Eastern markets. With more than seventy Turkish TV series sold and dubbed around the region, from Morocco to Kazakhstan, a meeting between a Bosnian, a Croat, and a Serb who differ on everything political could agree on what to make of the last heartbreak in the latest Turkish soap opera.

The AKP's handling of Israel has been erratic, with trade still continuing but minimal diplomatic relations being conducted through second secretaries and a near-complete break in former military cooperation. As part of a return to the best of what the AKP represented in the early- to mid-2000s, Turkey would benefit from a normalization of ties with Israel as part of a Turkish strategy of equidistance from all its neighbors. However, in this case, the AKP is arguably less to blame for current troubles than the government of Israel. Until 2009, the AKP continued the previous policy of engagement with Israel. AKP leaders often visited the Jewish state, trade rose, and in 2005 Prime Minister Erdoğan himself paid his respects at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, although he declined to cover his head with a yarmulke. Turkey productively hosted several rounds of modest proximity talks between Israel and Syria in 2008.

By contrast, Israel has clearly taken the key steps that escalated the post-2009 deterioration in its relationship with Turkey. Understandably, Erdoğan felt personally betrayed in December 2008 when Israel launched its Gaza operation only days after he had spent five hours dining with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in his residence, doing his best as the Israeli-Syrian process seemed to be close to achieving real results. It was when this Gaza operation killed 1,430 Palestinians, including many civilians,

that Erdoğan staged his angry outburst against Israeli President Shimon Peres and his now legendary walk-out from the World Economic Forum in Davos. It was an Israeli deputy foreign minister who chose later, in 2009, to insult the Turkish ambassador in front of TV cameras. It was Israeli commandos who killed nine Turks (including a Turkish-American) in May 2010, on board a multi-national flotilla that was, in theory, trying to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza. This may have been a reckless idea implicitly approved of by the AKP, but the midnight Israeli assault was on a ship, in practice, steaming south towards Egypt in international waters seventy miles off the Israeli coast. It was also the Israeli government that has declined to endorse an Israeli apology for this incident, the text of which diplomats from both sides have already agreed.

In the short term, the AKP's challenge to Israel became a principal ingredient in Turkey's new popularity on the Arab street. However, since the mid-2000s, the AKP has been neglecting another key element of Turkey's success—and its regional appeal—namely, a healthy relationship with the EU. Europe as a whole still takes more than half of Turkey's exports, against only a quarter taken by the Middle East. EU states supply more than three quarters of Turkey's foreign direct investment, the best pointer toward future economic integration. And of the 183 million people who visited the country in the first decade of the new millennium, only 10 percent of visitors came from the Muslim world. Europe is home to up to four million Turks, while less than 100,000 live and work in the Middle East. High oil prices offer Middle Eastern opportunities for Turkish commercial expansion, but these markets are continuing to prove as risky as they have in the past.

The AKP's and Erdoğan's principal ambition is to see Turkey as a rich and powerful hub between the Middle East and Europe, and the Mediterranean and Russia. To achieve this, it will have to find its way back to a balance between the spokes of that hub, including, for instance, Turkey's place as part of European and transatlantic alliances. This is precisely what has, for a long time, made it seem so special to the Middle East.

Turkey and the AKP are riding high in international opinion. The energetic reforms of the AKP's first years in office have, after a time lag, succeeded in changing the minds of Westerners who have for too long been skeptical about Turkey. The Middle East has been charmed by Turkey's commercial success, the legitimacy of its politics, and its willingness to publicly challenge Israel. Domestically and internationally, the AKP has done more than any previous government towards solving the problems that have hobbled Turkey for decades: the overbearing dominance of the Turkish military, human rights abuses, infrastructural development, Cyprus, the Turkish Kurd problem, and the Armenian question.

As a result, there has been remarkably little weight given to a growing drumbeat bearing news of similarities to the bad old days of the 1990s: shrill complaints from

Turkish media about official pressure to toe the government line, hundreds of dissidents in jail on flimsy charges of terrorism, and a new flaring up of the PKK insurgency. Nearly all segments of Turkish society complain that the judicial system is failing to deliver justice, that the education system needs to move much faster from learning by rote, and that polarization in politics and along the secular-religious divide means that much-needed constitutional reform is hamstrung. AKP initiatives on Cyprus, the Kurds, and Armenia have all run out of steam. The old moral hazard from the Cold War years also appears to be returning, as Washington once again overlooks Ankara's domestic policy shortcomings in return for support for the U.S. agenda in the region.

Even so, at the ten-year point, Erdoğan's AKP is in a much better position than his most similar predecessors, Menderes' Democrat Party in the 1950s and Özal's Motherland Party in the 1980s–90s. Erdoğan is able to command massive public support and has strong international winds filling his sails. Still, much of that support is derived from the reputation established during the AKP's early years, dynamics that are now much-diminished: real work on EU convergence, more consensual decision-making and a modest, equidistant approach to Turkey's complex diplomatic engagements. It is to these dynamics that Erdoğan and the AKP must return if they are to succeed in truly taking Turkey into the global first division.