

## THE 2007 TURKISH ELECTIONS: GLOBALIZATION AND ATATURK'S LEGACY

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Ilan Berman  
Vice President for Policy  
American Foreign Policy Council

Chairman Hastings, distinguished members of the Commission:

It is a privilege to appear before you today. This past Sunday, citizens of Turkey went to the polls in what was arguably the most anticipated—and controversial—election in the country's recent history. The results of that vote hold major implications for internal Turkish politics, as well as for the state of the bilateral relationship between Washington and Ankara.

By any yardstick, the outcome of the election was a major victory for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and a serious blow to the country's secularist forces. As a result of the voting, the AKP, which swept to political power in November 2002 with 34 percent of the vote, widened its lead to 46 percent, securing 341 seats in the country's 550 seat parliament. Significantly, the AKP's growing popularity parallels the growing religiosity of Turkish society as a whole. According to last year's Pew Global Attitudes survey, close to half of Turks now identify themselves as Muslim, up from just a third when the AKP first took power in 2002. As such, it serves as an accurate barometer of the country's evolving political direction.

The AKP's strong showing does not mean that there are no constraints on its rule, however. To the contrary, significant gains by two other political factions—the center-left Republican People's Party (CHP), which garnered 20 percent of the vote, and the conservative Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which received 14.5 percent—mean that the AKP now will face greater opposition within parliament than it did previously. (In 2002, by contrast, only the CHP managed to surmount the 10 percent threshold mandated for party representation.) A further complicating factor is the smattering of candidates, most from the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party, who also managed to gain representation by running as independents in order to

circumvent the 10 percent requirement. The AKP will now need to deal with these added variables, adding to the potential for domestic political inertia and stability.

If the AKP was the largest beneficiary of Sunday's poll, the country's military was indisputably the biggest loser. Back in April, the Turkish General Staff ignited a political firestorm when it publicly warned that it was prepared to intervene in the country's political process to defend "secularism." That warning, characterized by many observers as a "soft coup," touched off a fierce national debate over the country's future political direction. The gains charted by the AKP in Sunday's elections—which exceeded even the most optimistic projections of informed observers—can be interpreted as at least in part a backlash against the military's political interference, and a not-so-subtle reprimand to the General Staff.

Sunday's election does not signal the end of the discussion regarding Turkey's political future, however. Far from it. At least six issues have the potential to exert a decisive impact on Turkey's future domestic and international direction in the near term. As such, they bear continued close scrutiny by policymakers in Washington.

#### The presidential question

The battle-lines over the next national political issue are already being drawn. With its power to appoint cabinet officials, veto draft laws and convene referendums, the Turkish presidency is a major center of power—and a key political prize. The AKP has already made at least one effort to seize control of this office; in May, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan floated a package of constitutional reforms that would have given the Turkish public (rather than the parliament) the authority to elect the president. Back then, however, the proposal was quickly vetoed by sitting president Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who deemed there to be "no justifiable or acceptable reason or necessity" for such a step. The issue, however, is far from settled. The AKP's proposed measure has been referred to the country's Constitutional Court, and a referendum is now scheduled for late October. At that time, it is expected to pass handily, reopening a political contest between Islamist and secularist forces within the Turkish body politic.

#### "Stealth Islamization"

Since it took office in late 2002, the Islamist-influenced AKP has been accused by many of attempting to orchestrate a "creeping coup" against Turkey's established secular order. The AKP is well aware of this controversial image, and seeking to soften it; ahead of the July 22<sup>nd</sup> poll, it took pains to enlist—and then to run—a number of non-religious candidates. Since its electoral victory, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been quick to announce his commitment to preserving secularism. As a practical matter, however, the concerted assault on the secular

institutions of Mustafa Kemal Attaturk's republic carried out by the AKP in recent years—including the judiciary, the military and the media—belies a deep-seated desire to erase the dividing lines between mosque and state. With the outcome of Sunday's election widely seen as a popular endorsement of AKP policies, this "Islamization" drive can be expected to expand and strengthen in the months and years ahead.

#### Anti-Americanism/anti-Semitism

Perhaps not coincidentally, recent years have seen an upsurge in anti-American and anti-Semitic sentiment. In its latest Global Attitudes survey, released last month by the Pew Research Center, only nine percent of Turks polled in expressing positive views of the U.S.—a decline of some 43 percent from 2002 levels. At the same time, negative attitudes toward Jews and the state of Israel are increasingly visible, both at the official level (with the AKP branding Israel a "terrorist state" and hosting a high-level delegation from the Hamas movement in Ankara) and on the Turkish "street" itself, where Hitler's *Mein Kampf* has emerged as a bestselling book.

Of course, the AKP is not directly responsible for these developments. But it would be fair to say that it is complicit in them. Party officials have studiously avoided speaking out publicly in favor of the United States or Israel, despite Ankara's regular diplomatic and strategic contacts with both countries. So far, they have also failed to curb the growing anti-American and anti-Semitic invective emanating from the country's Islamist press, in spite of the AKP's significant power over this constituency.

#### Eastward tilt

Turkish officials often intone that, as a result of its strategic location and geopolitical outlook, their country must pursue a policy of "strategic depth"—a simultaneous orientation toward both east and west. In practice, however, the AKP has shown a clear preference for the former over the latter. Since taking office in 2002, under the guise of an "independent" foreign policy, Ankara has drifted toward accommodation with its traditional rivals in the Middle East, Iran and Syria. At the same time, Ankara's attitudes toward Europe and the United States have cooled considerably. This state of affairs should be deeply alarming for American policymakers. Simply put, a Turkey ever more closely aligned with regimes hostile to the United States will not—indeed, cannot be—a reliable ally in the War on Terror.

#### Attitudes toward Europe

A significant readjustment of Turkish attitudes toward Europe may also be in the offing. Although Turkey has been seeking to join the European community of nations for some two decades—and particularly since 2005, when the EU opened formal accession talks with Ankara—a deep sense of distrust with Europe is now evident

among all three of the country's political power centers: the Islamists, the secular nationalists, and the military. Publicly, the AKP has expressed a commitment to EU membership. Observers, however, suggest that the AKP is "interested in the process, not the end goal," and has deftly manipulated European accession demands in order to increase its own power at the expense of its chief political rival: the Turkish military. Secularist forces and the Turkish military have soured on the European Union for the same reason: they now perceive EU accession criteria to be a "poison pill" of sorts that has helped the AKP to progressively alter the character of the Turkish state.

### The Kurdish issue

According to Turkish analysts, their country now faces a challenge on four interrelated fronts. The first is a radicalized Kurdish minority in the southeast of Turkey itself, of which the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) terrorist group is the most active opponent of the government in Ankara. The second is across the border in northern Iraq—where the Kurdish-dominated regional government is said to condone anti-Turkish terrorist activities, and even to assist them. The third and fourth fronts are the Kurdish enclaves in neighboring Syria and Iran.

Of these, far and away the most acute at the moment is the situation in northern Iraq. So far, the Turkish military has stopped short of decisive military action against PKK elements operating across the border in Iraq, cognizant of the potential devastating consequences of a military incursion. Instead, it has created a number of "temporary security zones" on the Iraqi border as a way of interdicting cross-border terrorist activities. But Turkish officials have made perfectly clear that this step is not a permanent solution to their security problem. How Turkey chooses to respond to this challenge will have a pronounced impact upon stability in Iraq—and on Ankara's future ties with Washington.