



TURKEY

Quick Facts

Population: 82,017,514 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 783,562 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Turkish 70-75%, Kurdish 19%, other minorities 7-12% (2016 est.)

Government Type: Presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$851.5 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

INTRODUCTION

While Turkey remains a nominally secular republic, political Islam has been ascendant in the country since the military coup of 1980. The consolidation of power by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party in the past 15 years, however, has led to the gradual weakening of secularism and the promotion of political Islam in Turkish public life. Political Islam has become increasingly visible at the grassroots level, as pious Turks enjoy growing representation in the political process.

In parallel, the mounting authoritarian tendencies of the Turkish government have stifled political opposition. The transformation of Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system of government in a 2017 referendum has ensured, for the time being, that Erdoğan's political agenda faces no serious domestic challenges. That said, following the fallout with the Gülen Movement with whose support Erdoğan came to power, he has been forced into an uneasy alliance with domestic ultra-nationalists. This has not diminished Erdoğan's Islamism, however, but rather injected it with greater doses of Turkish nationalism.

Turkey's foreign policy has been transformed accordingly. Following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, Turkey actively intervened to secure the victory of political Islam across the Middle East and North Africa, lending support especially to the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated organizations. Turkey's efforts came to naught in both Egypt and Syria, however, and led to Ankara's growing isolation on the regional scene. But rather than reverse course, Turkey doubled down on this approach in Libya, where it has had some success to date in propping up the Brotherhood-aligned Tripoli government against the forces of the Libyan National Army.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamist forces in Turkey generally take one of three shapes: (1) Islamic brotherhoods and their offshoots; (2) formally incorporated civil society organizations and business entities; and (3) Islamist militant and terrorist groups. The Turkish government has historically had an ambiguous relationship with Islamism:

secularist tendencies seeking to limit the role of religion in state and society have coexisted with efforts to harness and control Islamism for official purposes. The latter tendency has grown since the 1980 military coup, and in particular after the AKP came to power in 2003.

Religious Orders and Communities¹

Religious brotherhoods have been the key focus of Turkish Islamic life since Ottoman times. These orders differed in terms of their focus on spiritual matters as opposed to participation in public life, and several jostled for influence in the Ottoman bureaucracy. They were nevertheless seriously weakened in the second half of the nineteenth century, as the modernization and secularization of the Ottoman state progressed. Thereafter, the Kemalist revolution forced them underground, but also made them increasingly political. With the introduction of multi-party democracy in the 1950s, they have gradually re-emerged as powerful forces in Turkish society and politics.

While Sufi orders are known for their esoteric and mystical nature, one diverges from this tendency: the Naqshbandi, which stands out for its compatibility with orthodox, official Islam. Tracing its chain of spiritual transmission to the first Sunni *Caliph*, Abu Bakr, it is firmly rooted in the orthodox Sunni tradition and in adherence to *sharia*.² The branch most influential in Turkey traces to Khalid-i-Baghdadi, a sheikh of Kurdish descent from present-day northern Iraq, who developed a new branch of the order known as Khalidiyya. This new branch built on earlier political activist practices, and added a powerful rejection of foreign rule and non-Islamic ideas. From the 1920s onward, the Khalidiyya became a leading element seeking to restore the supremacy of *sharia* law in reaction to secularization reform.³ When this failed, the order grew increasingly opposed to Ottoman leadership.⁴

This opposition continued into the Republican era, during which the Khalidi order generated a number of lodges, as well as offshoot communities not formally Naqshbandi-Khalidi, but which were created by individuals steeped in the order's tradition. Examples of formal lodges include the influential Iskender Paşa and Menzil; offshoot groupings include most prominently the Fethullah Gülen community, as well as smaller groups such as the Süleymanlılar.

In political terms, it is hard to overstate the role of the Iskender Paşa lodge. Its leader from 1958 until his death in 1980, Mehmet Zahid Kotku, was the informal leader of Turkish political Islam. Kotku adapted to the new environment of democratic politics, in which he pushed an anti-colonial agenda intent on unshackling Turkey from foreign "economic slavery." Kotku's followers successfully ensconced themselves in a number of state agencies, most notably the State Planning Organization, where they began to exert influence both on policy and on personnel appointments.⁵ As Turkish scholar Birol Yeşilada has noted, the Naqshbandis "always emphasized the need to conquer the state from within by aligning themselves with powerful sources of capital and political actors."⁶ This influenced the strategy of many religious communities in the decades to come.

Kotku formally approved the creation of the first major Islamist political party in 1969: Necmettin Erbakan's National Order Party. Thereafter, Kotku's followers in the Iskender Paşa lodge reached unprecedented positions in Turkey. Besides Erbakan, Turgut Özal became Prime Minister and President of Turkey, as did Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In addition, over a dozen followers reached ministerial positions—suggesting an enormous influence for a small religious lodge. Today, the religious influence of the Iskender Paşa lodge is no longer an important factor, yet it formed a generation of Turkish Islamist politicians, making an outsize imprint on Turkish politics.

The Menzil lodge, based in Adıyaman, is a branch of the Khalidiyya that has risen to prominence in recent decades. The lodge is very large, having branched out to Turkey's major cities, particularly Ankara. It grew to prominence in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup, partly because of its support for the state and its proximity to Turkish nationalist groups, including the late founder of the National Unity Party, Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu. In the AKP government, former Energy Minister Taner Yıldız and Health

Minister Recep Akdağ are known for their allegiance to Menzil. The lodge controls a business association, TÜMSIAD, which boasts 15,000 members, and whose leader, Hasan Sert, spent two terms as an AKP member of parliament.

The Nurcu movement is often termed a religious brotherhood, but rejects that notion: it terms itself a school of exegesis. Its founder was the preacher Said-i Nursi, who hailed from Erzurum in Kurdish-dominated eastern Turkey. Nursi was strongly influenced by Naqshbandi-Khalidi sheikhs: he studied in Naqshbandi schools, and was formally initiated into the order. Nurcu communities—including the Gülen groups, in turn an offshoot from the Nurcu—all share the common characteristic of seeking to raise new generations trained simultaneously in religious education and modern science.

During the 1960s, Nursi's followers spread all over Turkey, where they set up circles to study his *Risale-i Nur*, a multi-volume exegesis in which Nursi expounded on the meaning of the Quran. After his death, Nursi's movement split over methods for teaching his work. There are a dozen influential Nurcu groups today, the largest and most important of which is the Gülen group. Nursi's teaching urged his followers to remain aloof from politics; most Nurcu groups did so until the creation of the AKP. Yet, they indirectly tended to provide electoral support for center-right parties, and importantly, not the Islamists under Erbakan.

The Gülen movement is an offshoot from the *Nurcu* community. Over the years, it established its own place—not only by its sheer size, but by emphasizing Gülen's role as spiritual leader over that of Nursi.⁷ Gülen, who began his activities in Izmir in the 1960s, refers to the movement as the *Hizmet* movement, literally meaning “service,” a term taken from Nursi's concept of *hizmet-i imaniye ve kur'aniye*, or service to the faith and Quran.

The Gülen movement stands out by its focus on education, developing a network of schools that particularly attracted children of conservative families who sought a culturally conservative education.

In the early 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union provided an opportunity to export this model to the newly independent Turkic-speaking states. From there on, the movement developed a global presence, with its epicenter in the Poconos mountains in Pennsylvania, where Gülen resides since moving into self-imposed exile in 1998. At its peak, the movement ran an astounding 1,200 schools in 140 countries.⁸ Before its fallout with Erdoğan in 2013, the movement controlled substantial financial institutions, a large business association, TUSKON, Turkey's largest-circulation newspaper, *Zaman*, and a number of charitable organizations.

Compared to most religious communities in Turkey, the Gülen movement stands out by abstaining from the anti-western attitudes that dominate Turkey's Islamic milieu. Because Gülen is a resident of the United States, the movement is effectively run from his compound in the Poconos. Perhaps, as a result of this, it is generally pro-American and eschews the anti-Israeli rhetoric of the Islamist groups of Turkey. Thus, the Gülen movement diverges considerably from its roots in the Naqshbandi-Khalidi movement. While the movement stayed away from electoral politics, it focused on increasing its presence in the state bureaucracy in ways that were fully clear only in the aftermath of the July 2016 failed military coup. The movement's considerable success in this regard initially made it Erdoğan's main partner, but subsequently his most powerful enemy.

Similar to the Nurcu movement, the Süleymanci movement has its roots in the Naqshbandi order, but is not technically a lodge of its own. Its founder, Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, received religious education in the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order. After the suppression of religious schools following the Kemalist revolution, Tunahan developed a network for teaching the Quran in small groups. The movement then spread when Quranic classes were once again allowed in 1947. It is present not only in Turkey, but particularly in Europe, having set up several hundred mosques and Quranic schools in Germany.

Tunahan died in 1959, but his son-in-law, Kemal Kaçar, took over leadership of the movement. The Süleymanci tended to support Süleyman Demirel's Justice Party, and Kaçar served in parliament for the

party for many years. However, the movement was divided when Kaçar died in 2000 and a struggle for leadership broke out between two of Tunahan's grandsons. The two wings ended up supporting different political parties: one faction leader, Mehmet Denizolgun, became a founding member of the AKP, while his brother Ahmet shifted political affiliations. He first joined Erbakan's Welfare Party, then switched allegiance to the Motherland Party (ANAP). In 2007, he ran on the ill-fated Democrat Party ticket, but in 2011 and 2015, he supported the nationalist MHP.⁹

Charities/Organizations

In their efforts to better organize and expand their reach, Turkish Islamists have expanded their activity from orders and brotherhoods to NGOs and business groups. Nearly every lodge or religious community has formed affiliated formal organizations.

The most well-known of these may be the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), which organized the May 2010 humanitarian aid flotilla to the Gaza Strip that resulted in a raid by Israeli forces that left nine dead.¹⁰ The IHH is not considered a terrorist group by Turkey. The group operates as a humanitarian relief organization, and has close ties both to the unreformed Saadet (Islamist Felicity) Party and to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).¹¹ Formed to provide aid to Bosnian Muslims in the mid-1990s,¹² it has held "Special Consultative Status" with the United Nations Economic and Social Council since 2004.¹³ However, French counterterrorism magistrate Jean-Louis Bruguière has accused the group of helping *mujahedeen* to infiltrate the Balkans in the mid-1990s, and alleges that the IHH is affiliated with al-Qaeda.¹⁴ IHH continues to undertake broad humanitarian activities in emergency-stricken areas around the globe, placing a larger emphasis on countries with a Muslim population while appearing to use these activities as a cover for relations with global *jihadi* networks.¹⁵ It has been particularly active in Syria.

Established in 1990, MÜSİAD (the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association) appears to have originally been formed as a more religious counterpart to the country's predominant business group, the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TUSIAD).¹⁶ The group's main function appears to be to extend the reach of Islamist capital – what is called *yeşil sermaye* (green money) in Turkey. Green money is money from wealthy Islamist businessmen and Middle Eastern countries that, through careful investment, is funneled into legitimate businesses that end up serving as an engine for Islamist parties.¹⁷ MUSIAD and TUSKON differ in the nature of their members, with MUSIAD's members coming from AKP's Milli Görüş tradition, while those close to Gülen's *cemaat* were organized under TUSKON until that organization was also closed down following the coup.¹⁸

Terrorist Organizations

The İslami Büyük Doğu Akıncılar (Islamic Great Eastern Raiders, or IBDA) was founded in 1970 as a peripheral youth faction of Erbakan's Millî Selamet Partisi (National Salvation Party, or MNP). This group, known as Akıncılar, saw a splinter group develop under the leadership of Salih Mirzabeyoğlu, known as IBDA-C, the "C" standing for "cephe" or "front." It became the first group in the history of modern Turkey to advocate armed struggle in the service of an Islamic revolution. Its ideology, notable and perhaps unique among modern Islamist groups, is a mixture of Sunni Islam, Trotskyism, and Platonic idealism. IBDA-C adheres to this ideology, but differs from the mainstream currents due to its use of violence, including terrorism, to achieve its goals—something that has made the group marginal in political terms. No precise estimate of the size of its membership exists. Members organize independently, without any defined hierarchy or central authority, and both its legal and illegal actions are carried out via autonomous local "front" groups that cooperate with other opposition elements in Turkey when necessary.¹⁹

IBDA-C joined al-Qaeda in claiming responsibility for the November 2003 bombings in Istanbul.²⁰ In the summer of 2008, a front staged an armed attack on the United States General Consulate in Istanbul, killing three police officers who had been defending it. Turkish police claimed to have dismantled several

cephe the following year. On October 7, 2014, the group formally pledged its support to the Islamic State.²¹ Its leader, Salih Izzet Erdiş, was released that year after a decade-and-a-half in prison. Upon his release, Erdoğan met with him and, following his death in 2019, senior AKP leaders including Defense Minister Hulusi Akar visited his grave.²²

Turkish Hezbollah is a Kurdish Sunni extremist organization founded in the 1980s by Hüseyin Veliöğlü, an ethnic Kurd and former student activist, in the southeastern city of Diyarbakır. The organization, which is unrelated to the Lebanese Shiite militia of the same name (but shares its sympathy for Iran) seeks to establish an Islamic state in three distinct phases: (1) a period of propaganda and indoctrination, known as *tebliğ* (communication); (2) the consolidation of a popular base, known as *cemaat* (community); and (3) a *jihad* to overthrow the secular order and establish an Islamic state.²³ It is vehemently hostile to the Marxist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Beginning in the mid-1990s, Turkish Hezbollah expanded its activities from killing PKK militants to conducting low-level bombings against liquor stores and other establishments that the organization considered *haram* (forbidden).²⁴ Turkish Hezbollah is known for cleaver-assaults, kidnappings, beatings, acid attacks on women not dressed in an Islamic manner, and assassinations. Consecutive Turkish governments have accused Iran of using Hezbollah in Turkey in a similar manner as its counterpart in Lebanon.²⁵

The Turkish government initially ignored Hezbollah, hoping that its Islamism might provide an ideological bulwark against the rival PKK's atheistic Marxism. But by the late 1990s, Turkish authorities acknowledged that Hezbollah had become a major threat in its own right, and moved against the group.²⁶ Leader Huseyin Veliöğlü was killed in a shootout with Turkish forces in January 2000. The incident touched off a series of counterterrorism operations against the group, resulting in some 2,000 detentions and the arrests of several hundred on criminal charges. Turkish Hezbollah has not conducted a major operation since it assassinated the popular Diyarbakır police chief in 2001.²⁷ In January 2010, five members of the group were freed in accordance with a new national law restricting the amount of time suspects can be held while awaiting the final verdict in their cases.²⁸

Hüda-Par ("Free Cause Party") is a Kurdish Sunni radical party that emerged from Turkish Hezbollah. It is reported to be sympathetic to ISIS. Following a decision to end its armed struggle in 2002, sympathizers of Turkish Hezbollah founded the Solidarity with the Oppressed Association, Mustazafalar ile Dayanışma Derneği or Mustazaf Der.²⁹ In 2010, Mustazaf Der held a celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday estimated to have been attended by 120,000 people. A Diyarbakır court then ordered the closure of Mustazaf Der on the grounds that it was a front for Hezbollah. Societies associated with *Hüda-Par* operate under the umbrella organization Peygamber Sevdalıları ("Lovers of Prophet," or in "Evindarên Pêyxamber" in Kurdish).³⁰

The Caliphate State, also known as the Kaplan group and ICB-AFID, is a terrorist group that operates in Germany and seeks to overthrow the secular Turkish government and establish an Islamic state modeled after Iran. The group was founded by Cemalettin Kaplan, following his parting with the Millî Görüş movement in Turkey, and subsequently led by his son Metin after the elder Kaplan's death in 1995. Its immediate purpose is to gather the Muslim masses living in Europe under an Islamic banner to reject democracy and Western culture. Its ultimate goal is to establish a federative Islamic state on Anatolian soil based on Shari'a by overthrowing the constitutional state and the secular order. The group, organized as Verband der Islamischen Vereine und Gemeinden e.V. (*İslami Cemaat ve Cemiyetler Birliği/ ICCB*) with 1,200 members in Germany and an estimated membership of 5,000 around Europe, was outlawed by the German authorities in 2002.³¹ Despite the increasingly Islamist nature of Turkey, the Kaplan group has not changed its attitude toward the Turkish government.

Kudüs Ordusu (also known as Tevhid-Selam or "The Army of Jerusalem") is an illegal organization which emerged in 1985. Using the publication of several magazines, including Tevhid and Selam, as a cover, the group often collaborated with other organizations and received its inspiration from the Qods

Force, a paramilitary unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.³² In 2000, twenty-four members were indicted for attempting to overthrow the country's secular regime and establish a state based upon religious law, and for their involvement in the assassinations of several pro-secular journalists and academics during the 1990s. Fifteen of them were subsequently convicted in 2002, with three receiving a death sentence (the death penalty has since been abolished in Turkey).³³

Al-Qaeda remains active in Turkey as well. In 2003, a Turkish chapter of the Bin Laden network surfaced, possibly in collaboration with IBDA-C members, to conduct terrorist attacks against two synagogues, an HSBC bank, and the British consulate.³⁴ Richard Barrett, the head of the UN's Al Qaeda and Taliban monitoring group, estimated in 2010 that there were over 100 Turkish-speaking al-Qaeda members along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.³⁵ Unfortunately, knowledge about al-Qaeda's current size and capabilities within Turkey is undercut by a chronic lack of proper study. Turkish police have been generally successful at thwarting al-Qaeda's attacks, and thwarted attacks rarely receive significant media attention. Furthermore, Turkey does not seem a natural target for al-Qaeda, given that its government is heavily influenced by Islamic ideals.³⁶ In fact, at least some tactical collaboration between the Turkish state and the Bin Laden network appears to have taken place in the past. In January 2015, leaked Turkish military documents indicated that the Turkish national intelligence service (MIT) was shipping weapons to al-Qaeda in Syria. Erdogan insisted these deliveries were destined for Syrian Turkmen groups. The veracity of the account is hard to establish—as is the veracity of much reported about Turkey since the fallout between Erdogan and Gülen. Media outlets have been officially banned from reporting on the incident, however.³⁷

The Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas are not domestic Turkish organizations, but have nonetheless become an increasingly prominent part of the Islamist scene in Turkey. Erdoğan's government proclaimed its support for Hamas as early as 2006, when it won elections in Gaza and proceeded to violently grab total power in the territory.³⁸ Following the Arab upheavals of 2011, Turkey moved to support the bid for power of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hamas's parent organization) across the Middle East and North Africa. In particular, Turkey supported the short-lived Brotherhood-affiliated government of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt. When Morsi's government was overthrown and the Brotherhood banned, the movement relocated its headquarters to Turkey and Qatar. By 2014, pressure from Gulf states led Qatar to ask a number of prominent Brotherhood figures to leave the country.³⁹ This led the Brotherhood to concentrate in Turkey, and the country has for practical purposes become the organization's global center. Several Brotherhood-aligned television stations today operate from there.⁴⁰ Upward of 20,000 Egyptian exiles, mostly attached to the Brotherhood, also now reside in Turkey, and are recipients of the Erdoğan's government's support.⁴¹

Hizb ut-Tahrir, founded in 1953, made its way to Turkey in 1978, espousing its aim of establishing an Islamic *caliphate* and introducing *sharia* law. The Turkish police have frequently detained members of the organization, which was formally outlawed by a Turkish court in 2004.⁴² The latest raid came in 2009, with authorities detaining 165 suspected Hizb ut-Tahrir members.⁴³ Though the exact size and breadth of the group's Turkish branch is not known, documents and maps confiscated during the 2009 raids have exposed the organization's plans to establish a *caliphate* across large portions of the globe.⁴⁴ Hizb ut-Tahrir is active in Turkey, despite having been formally banned, and boasts an organizational office in the capital city of Ankara, as well as a dedicated website under the name of Türkiye Vilayeti ("Turkish province.")⁴⁵ From 2013 to 2016, the organization held yearly meetings and demonstrations in support of the reinstatement of the *caliphate*, without encountering government intervention. In March 2017, however, its attempt to hold a conference in support of the Caliphate was denied, and Hizb ut-Tahrir leaders were briefly detained. However, they were released within several days, in contrast to secularist and Kurdish activists who have lingered in jails for months to years.⁴⁶ Still, the Turkish Information Technology and Communications Board banned access to the organization's sites in April 2017.⁴⁷ Lower courts and Turkish court of Cassation had determined that Hizb-ut Tahrir is a terrorist organization, a

decision upheld as recently as 2017. However, in 2018, the Erdoğan-controlled Constitutional Court overturned these findings, determining that there is insufficient evidence to classify it as a terrorist group.⁴⁸ As a result, in March 2019, it organized a “Caliphate Conference” in Ankara ahead of local elections, in which speakers called for the immediate abolition of the democratic republic.⁴⁹ The organization has continued to develop openly in Turkey: it operates a highly active publishing house called Köklü Değişim (Comprehensive Change) and organized a conference with hundreds of attendees in Istanbul in March 2020 entitled “From Family to the State – Building an Islamic Society.”⁵⁰

For several years, Turkey was an important logistical and financial base for the Islamic State (IS, or ISIS). However, as the group began targeting interests in Turkey, the government gradually altered its *laissez-faire* attitude to one of greater efforts to limit the group’s presence in the country. The basic logic behind Turkey’s approach to ISIS was that it was a lesser danger to Turkey than either the Kurdish forces in Syria or the Assad regime. ISIS’s strategy, on the other hand, was at first to lay low in Turkey. But when the group was unable to operate unhindered in the country, it began to seek to create a division between increasingly extremist Sunnis and others in society by carrying out acts of violence that increase the already-significant tensions along Turkey’s sectarian, ethnic, and political fault lines. It moreover sought to raise the price of Turkey’s involvement in the anti-ISIS coalition by targeting its tourism industry. For example, on January 12, 2016, an ISIS suicide bomber attacked Istanbul’s historic Sultanahmet Square, killing 12 people. All of the victims killed were foreign tourists. In response, the Turkish Army launched tank and artillery strikes on ISIS positions in Syria and Iraq.

ISIS sought to radicalize Islamist youth who have become alienated from their communities and encourage them to radical action.⁵¹ Polling showed that only about 1.3% of Turkey’s population sympathized with ISIS, which translates to roughly a million potential ISIS sympathizers in the country.⁵² The most fertile recruiting grounds have been the poorest areas in Turkey’s Kurdish southeast, where unemployment is roughly six times higher than elsewhere in the country.⁵³ The Dokumacılar (Weavers) was a branch of ISIS that specifically targeted the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) during the Syrian Civil War. Estimates of the group’s Turkish membership range from 60 to 400.⁵⁴

Turkey’s relationship to ISIS militants is the subject of much controversy. Ankara has armed and trained opposition fighters, hosted Syrian dissidents, and backed radical groups like Ahrar al-Sham, which worked with Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria’s al-Qaeda franchise.⁵⁵ Cengiz Candar, a Turkish journalist, has argued that Turkey’s intelligence service, MIT, helped “midwife” the Islamic State, as well as other *jihadi* groups.⁵⁶ However, from 2015 onward, Turkey gradually become far tougher on foreign fighters attempting to travel to Syria via Turkey, and launched a broad crackdown on militants streaming across its territory.

In March 2016, the *Washington Post* reported that Turkey had deported nearly 3,200 people suspected of foreign-fighter-related activities since the war in Syria began in 2011. An additional 3,000 were awaiting deportation in “returnee centers.” But even these numbers are but a small percentage of the total who traveled to Syria since 2011, the vast majority of whom entered Syria through Turkey.⁵⁷ (More recent figures detailing the scope of Turkey’s foreign fighter problem are not currently available.)

One reason the Turkish government was slow to target ISIS is that most of ISIS’s operations in Turkey targeted political opposition parties and Kurdish activists. This included the Dokumacılar bombings in 2015, and a massive suicide bombing in Ankara that October which killed 109 people. Evidence has come to light that Ankara’s anti-terror department received intelligence of these attacks before the bombings, but did not inform its superiors or the unit responsible for protecting the rally. Ankara police advised its agents to protect themselves against a potential suicide attack during the October 10th rally, but did not take any measures to protect the rally attendees.⁵⁸ The attack had a major impact on Turkish voters, and swung their votes in favor of AKP in the November 1st election.⁵⁹

From August 2016 onward, Turkey launched a series of military operations in northern Syria. This

began with the 2016-2017 Operation Euphrates Shield, which was initially supported by western powers. Over time, however, tensions arose as Turkey pushed deeper into Syria.⁶⁰ Turkey continued to secure a “de-escalation zone” in northern Syria in the fall of 2017, with Russian acquiescence. It then established a presence in northern Syria for the long haul. In October 2019, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring, which aimed to establish Turkish-controlled territories in northeastern Syria – areas thus far controlled by the Syrian Kurds – into which Turkey planned to relocate Syrian refugees in Turkey. Aside from its own military presence in northern Syria, Turkey has organized Arab and Turkmen militias into an umbrella force called the Syrian National Army, which is estimated to have some 25,000 fighters. These forces are bankrolled by Turkey, effectively functioning as Turkish-supported mercenaries. However, these various groups never gelled into a coherent force, and instances of infighting between them are numerous. Still, in 2019-20, the Pentagon Inspector General estimates that Turkey deployed up to 3,800 troops from the SNA into Libya, where they played a key role in fighting the Libyan National Army’s offensive against the Tripoli government supported by Turkey.⁶¹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Turkey’s population of nearly 80 million is over 99 percent of Muslim heritage. About 80 percent are Sunni, primarily of the Hanafi school, although the Shafi’i school is also represented primarily among Turkey’s Kurds. Some 15-20 percent of Turks are Alevis—an indigenous religious tradition nominally belonging to Shia Islam, but with strong syncretic elements drawing on Christian and neo-Platonic traditions. The Bektāşi order is strongly wedded to Alevi beliefs.⁶² In addition, 2-3 million adhere to the Twelver Jafari Shiism practiced in Iran—chiefly among Azerbaijani Turks in eastern Turkey—while several hundred thousand Nusairis exist in southern Turkey, near the Syrian border.

During the time of the Ottoman Empire, religious communities were allowed to govern themselves under their own *millet* (system)—*sharia* for Muslims, Canon Law for Christians and Halakha for Jews. In the millet system, people were defined by their religious affiliations, rather than their ethnic origins.⁶³ After the demise of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, the Republic of Turkey was founded on the ideals of modernism and secularism.⁶⁴ The founders of the modern republic considered the separation of religion and politics an essential step for adopting Western values and secularism, and a mandatory condition for its success as a Muslim nation.⁶⁵ The new regime therefore abolished the Ottoman sultanate in 1922 and the *caliphate* in 1924, replacing laws based on *sharia* with European legal codes.⁶⁶ Additionally, it switched from the Arabic alphabet to the Latin one, and from the Islamic calendar to the Gregorian while restricting public attire associated with religious affiliations (outlawing the fez and discouraging women from wearing the veil).

With the abolition of the *caliphate*, Islam no longer constituted the basis for the Turkish legal system. However, vestiges remained: despite the abolition of *Şeyhülislam*, the superior authority in the matters of Islam, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations,⁶⁷ Islam was still preserved as the state religion by the country’s 1924 Constitution, but this clause was abolished in 1928.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the Directorate for Religious Affairs, Diyanet, was established to oversee the organization and administration of religious affairs. The Unification of Instruction, *Tevhid-i Tedrisat*, brought all educational establishments under the control of the state.⁶⁹ Hence, the transformation from an imperial-religious entity to a national entity—from an *ummah* to a modern nation-state—was initiated.

Since the start of multi-party democracy in 1946 and the ensuing victory of the *Demokrat Parti* (the Democratic Party) four years later, Islamic groups have managed to take advantage of political parties pandering for votes. This is in part because they are capable of delivering considerable block votes to political parties. These orders and communities have increasingly become powerful players in Turkish politics, exploiting the deficiencies of the nation’s young democratic system.

The emergence of political Islam in Turkey was connected to the emergence of political Islam elsewhere in the Muslim world, particularly the rise of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Numerous scholars have noted the influence of key Brotherhood ideologists on former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan and the *Milli Görüş* movement.⁷⁰ While the Brotherhood is in principle opposed to Sufi orders, this does not appear to apply to the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order, which has deep Sunni roots.

In today's Turkey, indigenous Islamist groups imitate the strategies of foreign ones. Political sociologists and commentators have long recognized this phenomenon. For example, in a 1999 letter to then-Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, political scientist Gürbüz Evren warned about the importation of ideas and strategy from the Muslim Brotherhood, and that a new party based on this model was most likely to be founded out of a cadre of the Islamist *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party) and *Fazilet Partisi* (Virtue Party). As predicted, the AKP—which contains former members of both *Refah* and *Fazilet*—was founded on August 14, 2001, and went on to win the country's November 2002 parliamentary elections.⁷¹

Grassroots Islamism in Turkey is also strengthened by the infusion of “green money” from Middle Eastern states. These vast financial flows, estimated by government officials and Turkish economists to annually be worth billions,⁷² have given both imported and domestic interpretations of Islamism considerable voice in Turkish society. Moreover, extremist groups active in Turkey appear to be financed not only through domestic methods (including donations, theft, extortion, and other illicit activity), but also through funds from abroad that contribute to the cost of training and logistics. The amount and origin of such funding is not fully known, but is understood to be substantial. For example, documents recovered in the January 2000 raid against Turkish Hezbollah in Istanbul helped to expose the significant financial and logistical support Iran has provided the group. Since such raids by the security forces often disrupt group activity, foreign support serves as a much-needed lifeline in terms of sanctuary, training, arms, ammunition, food and clothing.⁷³

Turkish society in general does not appear as susceptible to radical Islamism as that of other Muslim nations or the Muslim communities in Europe. Traditionally, Turks have tended toward relatively liberal schools of thought in Islam, such as the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and Maturidi tradition, which grant considerable flexibility to the interpretation of religious law. Arab and Kurdish Islam, however, have tended toward the Hanbali and Shafi'i schools of thought, based on the Ashari tradition, which is much stricter.

When surveyed in 2007, 42 percent of Turks reported that they consider themselves unreligious or slightly religious, 37 percent are somewhat religious, and 21 percent identify themselves as very religious or extremely religious (with only 1.6 percent falling into the latter category).⁷⁴ Subsequent polls, such as the 2013 Eurobarometer survey, showed that the number of self-reported atheists had doubled.⁷⁵ A 2019 Konda poll confirms the tendency: compared to 2008 figures, the number of self-reported “religious conservatives” declined from 32 to 25 percent, and the percentage who fast during Ramadan went from 77 to 65 percent. Similarly, the percentage who agreed that a woman needs her husband's permission to work declined dramatically, from 69 to 55 percent.⁷⁶

However, Islamist groups in the form of “Islamic holdings” have been known to prey on religious communities in Anatolian Turkey and the religious Turkish population in Germany, borrowing directly from lenders without using any financial intermediaries and accumulating large sums of capital.⁷⁷ The support for Islamist terror groups by Turkish society, on the other hand, has been negligible and is restricted to the extreme minority.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Since the founding of the Turkish Republic, the Turkish state has made an effort to separate Islam from Islamism. In its attempt to erect a tradition of “state Islam,” the government has regulated religious affairs via the *Diyanet* (the Directorate of Religious Affairs established in 1924). The *Diyanet*, directly tied to the Office of the Prime Minister, coordinates the building of mosques, trains and appoints *imams*, and determines the topics for weekly Friday sermons by imams. Thus, in contrast with other regional states—where governments finance, certify, and supervise mosques but underground radical mosques, Koranic schools, and *imams* successfully compete with government establishments more or less unchecked—state Islam in Turkey has enjoyed a near-monopoly on legitimate expression of the Muslim faith.⁷⁸

Over the years, the formally secular nature of the Turkish state has led to constraints on political participation. Article 2 of the Turkish Constitution, which states, “The Republic of Turkey is a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law,”⁷⁹ has served as the basis for the closure of four political parties—the *Milli Nizam Partisi*, *Milli Selamet Partisi*, *Refah Partisi* and *Fazilet Partisi*—each of which was charged with violating the secular nature of the Republic. Twenty-two other parties have been banned for various reasons.⁸⁰

Turkey’s transition to a multi-party system and the evolution of Turkish democracy has been marked by friction between the competing pulls of modernization and traditional societal norms. Successful collective political action by tribal leaders, in combination with the appeasement policies of political leaders, has given tribal entities a disproportionate voice in Turkish politics, allowing the more traditional minority to dominate the country’s political scene.⁸¹ As a result, even the *Diyanet*, established to control the religious exploitation common in an earlier age, has ended up being dominated by one of the Islamist bodies it was intended to control, namely the Nakşibendi order. The outcome has been the further “Sunni-ization” of Turkey over the years, despite the supposed neutrality of the state toward all religions and their branches.

The behavior of the governing AKP since consolidating its power has exposed new approaches of imposing Islamism on Turkish society. The 2010 Constitutional Referendum weakened the separation of powers that previously existed in the Turkish political system, essentially giving the governing party the power to control all three branches of the government.⁸² Nearly all state institutions have been inundated with AKP cadres; any opposition is largely insignificant and has been silenced.

Education reforms in 2012-14 led to an Islamization of the public schooling system. The age limit preventing students under 12 years from attending Qur’an courses was lifted, and a program for the introduction of Qur’an courses for preschoolers was introduced. Qur’anic schools are now also allowed to have dormitories, enabling them to fully immerse students in a religious environment.

Public schools saw an extension of compulsory religious education, as well as the introduction of courses on the Life of Muhammad and on the Qur’an, bringing religious education to a possible total of six hours per week. While these courses are nominally elective, in many schools there is considered practically or socially mandated.⁸³

Erdoğan’s rhetoric continues to express support for a particular brand of Islamism – both at home and abroad. He has severely castigated Saudi Arabia’s reforms, rejecting the notion of “moderate Islam” advanced by Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Sultan in recent years. Erdoğan stated that this is a “trap to weaken Islam,” while AKP mouthpieces like the daily *Yeni Şafak* called Saudi reforms a “very dangerous game,” purportedly instigated by the United States and Israel, an “American plan whose final aim is to occupy Islam’s holy sites, Mecca and Medina.”⁸⁴ Similarly, Erdoğan threatened to cut ties with the UAE following Abu Dhabi’s summer 2020 announcement it would normalize ties with the Jewish State – despite Turkey’s continued relations with Jerusalem.⁸⁵

Domestically, Erdoğan has made symbolic gestures that suggest a greater Islamization of society. These include, most prominently, the conversion of the landmark Hagia Sophia cathedral into a mosque in July

2020. This was followed by the similar conversion of another medieval Greek Orthodox church in Istanbul into a museum the following month. While those actions cannot be separated from the growing tensions between Turkey and Greece over maritime issues in the Aegean and Mediterranean, they nevertheless point to Erdoğan's growing Islamist populism.

ENDNOTES

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