

# American Foreign Policy Council

## TURKEY

### QUICK FACTS

Population: 77,804,122

Area: 783,562 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Turkish 70-75%,  
Kurdish 18%, other minorities  
7-12%

Religions: Muslim 99.8% (mostly  
Sunni), other 0.2% (mostly  
Christians and Jews)

Government Type: Republican parliamentary democracy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$608 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)



*While Turkey has sporadically experienced Islamist terrorism since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the level of terrorist activity has been largely nonexistent since the 2003 Istanbul bombings carried out by al-Qaeda. By contrast, political Islamism has consistently gained in strength since the 1980s, peaking with the electoral victory of the Islamist-rooted AKP in November 2002. Islamism is increasingly visible in local communities as the AKP government continues to solidify its hold on political power, placing Islamists and those sympathetic to it in key posts in all three branches of the Turkish government and state bureaucracies, while using state power to help its cronies build business empires.<sup>1</sup>*

*The secular traditions of the Turkish Republic limits the appeal of radical Islamism among the Turkish society, in spite of the*

*fact that religiosity is important to a large majority of Turks.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, while the Turkish government is by and large effective in combatting Islamist terrorism,<sup>3</sup> the deficiencies of Turkish democracy<sup>4</sup> make it possible for Islamists to exploit religiosity and surreptitiously extend their reach in politics. And, with the rise of the AKP, Islamist brotherhoods and organizations increasingly are becoming the dominant political forces steering the Turkish ship of state, and working to broaden Islamism's appeal for ordinary Turks.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamist activity in Turkey generally takes place via one of the three channels: (1) through Islamist terrorist groups; (2) through the activities of charities and business organizations; and, most important, (3) through the activities of the Islamist brotherhoods—*tariqats*, communities and lodges—where political influence leads to cronyism and, ultimately, to corruption.

### *Terrorist Organizations*

The *Islamic Great Eastern Raider Front (IBDA-C)* is a Sunni Salafist group that supports full Islamic rule in Turkey. The group's members organize independently, without any defined hierarchy or central authority, and both its legal and illegal actions are carried out via local “front” groups which cooperate with other opposition elements in Turkey when necessary.<sup>5</sup> The group supports the establishment of a “pure Islamic” state, to replace the present “corrupt” Turkish regime that is cooperating with the West.<sup>6</sup> IBDA-C was founded in 1985 as a breakaway faction of the National Salvation Party, at the time headed by Islamic fundamentalist (and future prime minister) Necmettin Erbakan. The organization borrows its core ideology from Turkish poet and historian Necip Fazil Kısakurek (1905-1983), who advocated a return to “pure Islamic values” and the restoration of a universal Islamic caliphate in the Muslim world. Kısakurek also argued that the secular nature of Turkey was responsible for the state's inability to ward off what he saw as Western Imperialism.<sup>7</sup> The organization is highly decentralized, and consists of independent cells united by common goals and ideology, yet operating either autonomously or in concert depending on the circumstances. IBDA-C joined al-Qaeda in claiming responsibility

for the November 2003 bombings in Istanbul.<sup>8</sup> The group has not been involved in any activity since, and its leader Salih Izzet Erdis, also known as Salih Mirzabeyoglu, who was captured in late 1998 and subsequently sentenced to life in prison in June 2008.<sup>9</sup> The current status of IBDA-C is unknown.

*Turkish Hizbullah* is a Kurdish Islamic (Sunni) extremist organization founded in the 1980s by Huseyin Velioglu, an ethnic Kurd and former student activist, in the southeastern city of Diyarbakır. The purpose of the organization, which is unrelated to the Lebanese Shi'ite militia of the same name, is the establishment of an Islamic state. It seeks the establishment of an Islamic state through three distinct phases: (1) a period of propaganda and indoctrination, known as *tebliğ*, or “communication”; (2) the consolidation of a popular base, known as *cemaat*, or “community”; and (3) a *jihad* to overthrow the secular order and establish an Islamic state.<sup>10</sup> Beginning in the mid-1990s, Turkish Hizbullah expanded its activities from killing Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants to conducting low-level bombings against liquor stores, bordellos, and other establishments that the organization considered “anti-Islamic.”<sup>11</sup> The Turkish government initially largely ignored Hizbullah, even hoping that its Islamism might provide an ideological bulwark against the PKK's atheistic Marxism. By the late 1990s, however, Turkish authorities finally acknowledged that Hizbullah had become a major threat in its own right, and moved against the group.<sup>12</sup> Huseyin Velioglu was killed in a shootout with Turkish forces at a safehouse in Istanbul in January 2000. The incident touched off a series of counterterrorism operations against the group that resulted in the detention of some 2,000 individuals and the arrests of several hundred on criminal charges. Turkish Hizbullah has not conducted a major operation since it assassinated the popular Diyarbakir police chief in 2001.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

*The Caliphate State*, also known as the Kaplan group and ICB-AFID, is a Turkish fundamentalist 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 National View political movement in Turkey. 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 *sharia* by overthrowing the Constitutional state and the secular order. Since Cemalettin Kaplan self-appointed himself “the caliph” in 1994, the organization has been referred to as the Caliphate State. After Kaplan’s death in 1995, his son Metin Kaplan was elected the new Caliph, causing divisions within the organization. Following his declaration of *jihad* against Turkey, the new self-styled Caliph, Metin, was arrested by the German authorities and served a four-year prison sentence in Germany for inciting members of his group to murder a rival Islamic leader. He was then extradited to Turkey, where he was sentenced to life in prison for treason. His followers have reportedly become even more devoted to Kaplan, who is believed to have a fortune worth millions, considering him a martyr for the cause of Allah.<sup>15</sup> The group, organized as *Verband der Islamischen Vereine und Gemeinden e.V.* (Islami 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.<sup>16</sup>

*The Army of Jerusalem (Kudüs Ordusu or Tevhid-Selam)* is an illegal organization which emerged in 1985. Using the publication of several magazines, including *Tevhid* and *Selam*, as cover, the group often collaborated with other organizations and received its inspiration from the “Qods (Jerusalem) Force” paramilitary unit of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.<sup>17</sup> In the year 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.<sup>18</sup>

Al-Qaeda is also active in Turkey. 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.<sup>19</sup> According to

Richard Barrett, the head of the UN's al-Qaeda and Taliban monitoring group, there are over 100 Turkish-speaking al-Qaeda members along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.<sup>20</sup> Since the Istanbul bombings, Turkish authorities have cracked down on the members running the group's operations in Turkey, sentencing many of them to life in prison.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, there is *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. Founded in 1953, the group made its way to Turkey in 1978, espousing its aims of establishing an Islamic caliphate and introducing *sharia* law. The group was outlawed by a Turkish court in 2004.<sup>22</sup> The Turkish police have often detained members of the organization. The latest raid came in 2009 with the authorities detaining 165 suspected Hizb ut-Tahrir members.<sup>23</sup> 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 spanning from Ukraine to Spain in Europe, from Kazakhstan to India in Asia, from Morocco to Gabon and from Egypt to Mozambique in Africa and from Madagascar to Indonesia in the Indian Ocean.<sup>24</sup> Hizb ut-Tahrir is active in Turkey, despite having been formally banned by the Turkish courts, and boasts an organizational office in the capital city of Ankara, as well as a dedicated website under the name of *Türkiye Vilayeti*, or Turkish province.<sup>25</sup>

### *Charities/Organizations*

In their efforts to better organize and expand their reach, Turkish Islamists have expanded their activity from terrorist groups to NGOs. Nearly every *tariqat*, lodge or brotherhood has formed its own organization, be it charity or business.

The *IHH (The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief)*, which organized the May 2010 humanitarian aid flotilla to the Gaza Strip that resulted in a raid by the Israeli forces, leaving nine dead, is not considered a terrorist group. The group operates as a humanitarian relief organization and has close ties to Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).<sup>26</sup> Formed to provide aid to Bosnian Muslims in the mid-1990s,<sup>27</sup> it has held "Special Consultative Status" with the United Nations Economic and Social Council since 2004.<sup>28</sup> However, French counterterrorism magistrate Jean-Louis Bruguiere has accused the group

of helping *mujahideen* to infiltrate the Balkans in the mid-1990s, and alleges that the IHH is affiliated with al-Qaeda.<sup>29</sup> For its part, the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, an Israeli NGO with close ties to the country's military, does not dispute the IHH's legitimate philanthropic activities, but says that the organization is an overt supporter of Hamas and has helped provide weapons and funds for Hamas and other Islamic terrorist groups in the Middle East.<sup>30</sup>

Established in 1990, the vision of *MUSIAD* (*the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association*) is “[t]o become the number one business association in Turkey which is trusted and valued by majority of our people, which represents its country in the best way both domestically and internationally and whose members are sincerely loyal to their faith, by blending with the thousand year old values of its people.”<sup>31</sup> While *MUSIAD* claims that its name is an acronym for “Independent” (“*Müstakil*”), most Turks suspect that it stands for “Muslim (*Müslüman*) Industrialists and Businessmen's Association.” Indeed, the organization appears to have originally been formed as a more religious counterpoint to the country's predominant business group, the Turkish Industry and Business Association (*TUSIAD*).<sup>32</sup> The group does not appear to engage in illegal activity, but operates to extend the reach of Islamist capital—what is called *yeşil sermaye*, “green money,” in Turkey. Green money is basically 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.<sup>33</sup>

### *Brotherhoods*

One cannot present an accurate picture of Turkey without highlighting the social activities and political influence of Islamist brotherhoods—namely, the *tariqats*, the *cemaats*, the *tekkes* and their varying extensions. The problem with the brotherhoods does not lie in their political involvement, however corrupt it may be, but rather in the unconditionally submissive tribal nature of the group to a sheik or a *hoca*, i.e., to the wishes of a single gang leader.

While numerous *tariqats* exist, three groups in particular—the *Kadiris*, the *Nakshibendis* and the *Nurcus*—founded

the *Milli Nizam Partisi* (National Order Party) in 1970, and then the *Milli Selamet Partisi* (National Salvation Party) a couple years later. In doing so, they sowed the seeds for the modern political Islamist movement in Turkey. The Nakshibendis and the *Nurcus* have increasingly become the dominant forces in Turkey in the last decade.

The most deeply-rooted *tariqat*, originating in Middle Asia centuries ago, *Nakshibendis* in Turkey are comprised of the Suleyman, Iskenderpasha, Erenkoy, Ismailaga, Işıkçılar, Menzilci and Haznevi groups (communities and lodges) among others.<sup>34</sup> The Nakshibendis have a long track record of supporting conservative parties on the right, including Islamist parties like Refah and its modern iteration, the AKP. The Suleymancis have dominated the state-controlled Directorate of Religious Affairs since the 1940s.<sup>35</sup> The Ismailaga lodge has focused on spreading its influence among poor voters,<sup>36</sup> while the Erenkoy and Iskenderpasha lodges have appealed to middle- to upper-class voters. Turkish political leadership—Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan, prime ministers Turgut Ozal and Tayyip Erdogan—have all been a part of or close to the Iskenderpasha community.<sup>37,38</sup>

The *Nur cemaat* emerged some time in the first quarter of the 20th century (no exact date can be found anywhere, including the movement's own websites) as a Sunni movement based on the teachings of its founder—a Muslim Kurd named Said-i Kurdi (also known as Said-i Nursi), who, in a 1922 letter to Ataturk demanded that the new republic base itself on Islamic principles.<sup>39</sup> The group was often subjected to pressure by successive Turkish governments until Nursi's death in 1960. Thereafter, the movement has split into different groups, the most active of which is the Fethullah Gulen *cemaat*, which has schools not only in all regions of Turkey, but also internationally from Africa to the Far East Asia,<sup>40</sup> including the United States. In addition to schools, the movement includes the Journalists and Writers Foundation, various businesses, and media outlets such as *Zaman* and its English-language edition, *Today's Zaman*, *Samanyolu TV*, and *Aksiyon Weekly*. According to a detailed 2009 study, the movement seeks to fundamentally transform Turkish society via its extensive network of media, bureaucratic, academic and economic connections.<sup>41</sup> Concerns over the political

agenda of the group has been raised by U.S. government officials as well. The Gulenists have supported the AKP (Justice and Development Party) since 2002.

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Turkey's population of nearly 79 million is 99.8 percent Muslim, most of them Sunni, the remainder Christian and Jewish.<sup>42</sup> During the reign of the Ottoman Empire, religious communities were allowed to govern themselves under their own system (*millet*)—*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. The head of a *millet*—most often a religious hierarch, such as the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople—reported directly to the Ottoman Sultan.<sup>43</sup>

After the demise of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, the Republic of Turkey was founded upon the ideals of modernism and secularism.<sup>44</sup> The founders of the modern Republic considered the separation of religion and politics an essential step to adopting Western values and secularism, and as mandatory condition for its accomplishment in a Muslim nation.<sup>45</sup> The new regime therefore abolished the Ottoman sultanate in 1922 and the caliphate in 1924, replacing laws based on *sharia* with European legal codes.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, they switched from the Arabic alphabet to the Latin and from the Islamic calendar to the Gregorian while restricting public attire associated with atavistic Ottoman and 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 abolishment of *Şeyhülislam*, the superior authority in the matters of Islam, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations,<sup>47</sup> Islam was still preserved as the state religion by the Constitution of 1924,<sup>48</sup> and 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.<sup>49</sup> Hence, the transformation from a tribal entity to a national entity – from an *ummah* to a modern nation-state – was initiated.

Since the start of the multi-party democracy in 1946 and the ensuing victory of the Democratic Party, *Demokrat Parti*, four years later, the Islamist groups consisting of Sufi brotherhoods - *tariqats*, communities and lodges - and have managed to take advantage of the appeasement strategies of political parties in competition for votes and have increasingly become powerful players in Turkish politics, often exploiting the deficiencies of the nation's young democratic system. Islamist terrorism has also become a factor since the 1980s, gaining momentum after the 1990s.

In today's Turkey, indigenous Islamist groups imitate the strategies of foreign Islamists. Political sociologists and commentators have long warned of this phenomenon. For example, in a 1999 letter to then-Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, political scientist Gurbuz Evren warned about the importation of ideas and strategy from the Muslim Brotherhood:

The political Islamist segment is currently trying to establish the Egypt-originated 'Muslim Brotherhood' model in Turkey. This model aims to create an "alternative society within a society." According to the model, the fundamental needs of the poverty-stricken masses and the low-income segments are designated. Then, hospitals and medical centers that provide free medical services are established, scholarships are increasingly provided for students, religious educational institutions are disseminated, the number of soup kitchens and charities that hand out clothes and financial aid are increased. On days like wedding days, holidays and child births, people are paid visits to make them feel they are not alone and are given gifts. In short, a society comprised of people who are made to believe that their problems can be solved not by the current order, but via the religion of Islam that embraces them... a society comprised of people who are dressed

differently with totally different lifestyles... a society comprised of people who will eventually toil to influence and pressure the rest of the society will be created.<sup>50</sup>

Evren had even warned 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.

Grassroots Islamism in Turkey is also strengthened by the infusion of “green money” from other Middle Eastern states. These vast financial flows, estimated by government officials and Turkish economists at between \$6 billion and \$12 billion from 2002 to 2005,<sup>51</sup> have given both imported and domestic interpretations of Islamism considerable voice in Turkish society. Moreover, terrorist groups active in Turkey appear to be financed not only through domestic methods (including donations, theft, extortion, and other illicit activity), but also via funds from abroad as well as training and logistics. The amount and origin of such funding is not fully known, but are understood to be substantial. For example, documents recovered in the January 2000 raid against Hizbullah in Istanbul helped to expose the significant financial and logistical support Iran has been providing for the group. Foreign contributions such as this go a long way toward defining the effectiveness of these groups. 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.<sup>52</sup>

Turkish society in general does not appear as susceptible to Islamism as that of other Muslim nations, or the Muslim communities in Europe. When it comes to religious conservatism, 42 percent of Turks consider themselves irreligious or slightly religious, 37 percent are somewhat religious while just half that number, 21 percent, identify themselves as very religious or extremely religious (with only 1.6 percent falling into the latter category).<sup>53</sup> However, Islamist groups in the form of “Islamic holdings” have been known

to prey on the 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.<sup>54</sup> The support for Islamist terror groups by the 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.<sup>55</sup>

Over the years, the formally secular nature of the Turkish state has led to constraints on political participation as well. Article 2 of the Turkish Constitution, which codifies that “The Republic of Turkey is a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law,”<sup>56</sup> has served as the basis for the closure of four political parties—the *Millet Partisi* (the Nation Party), *Milli Nizam 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 other reasons.<sup>57</sup>

While the Turkish military has been involved in several interventions (commonly termed as “coups”) over the years, only one—the 1997 warning from the country’s National Security Council that led to the resignation of Necmettin Erbakan’s ruling Islamist coalition—was related to a violation of secularism. Turkey’s transition to a multi-party system and the evolution of the Turkish democracy

since has been marked by friction between the competing pulls of modernization and traditional societal mores. 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.<sup>58</sup> 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 Suleymancis of the Nakshibendi *tariqat*. The outcome has been further "Sunni-ization" of Turkey over the years, despite the supposed neutrality of the state toward all religions and their branches. In keeping with this trend, the U.S. State Department's 2010 *Report on International Religious Freedom* notes that the Turkish state "provided training for Sunni Muslim clerics" while "religious communities outside the Sunni Muslim mainstream have not found a suitable system to train leadership inside the country within the current legal framework."<sup>59</sup> The report goes on to detail that "Alevi children received the same compulsory religious education as all Muslim students, and many Alevis alleged discrimination in the government's failure to include any of their doctrines or beliefs in religious instruction classes in public schools."<sup>60</sup>

The nature of the game is the power struggle to dominate the political system that does not take into account the true voice of the people, as it does not allow the voters to elect their own parliamentary representatives. The party leaders handpick the members of the parliament and practically dictate which decisions they make, just as the sheiks and the hocas do. It is usually one political elite against another, who even collude when necessary, playing the same "Islam game" to squeeze out an advantage while tribalism resists modernity and keeps feeding off the Turkish people.

The counterterrorism efforts of the current Turkish government continue to be largely successful with regard to Islamism; Turkey has not been afflicted by Islamist terrorism since the al-Qaeda bombings in late 2003. By contrast, the Turkish government has not fared as well against the Kurdish terrorist group PKK, which continues to

carry out subversive activities and acts of violence against the Turkish state.<sup>61</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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