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Turkey: Politics at the Crossroads of Civilizations¹

Maia Carter Hallward

This article discusses how Turkey is often under-studied due to the fact that it does not fit neatly into the analytical “boxes” used to discuss international politics. Not only does Turkey straddle Europe and Asia, but it is one of few Middle Eastern countries that was not ruled by Western empires (and, in fact, controlled parts of Europe). It is a non-Arab secular democracy currently governed by a Muslim-oriented party. Because of these unique characteristics, scholars and policy makers have much to learn from Turkey and its approach to challenging issues of regional concern.

Introduction

I was recently asked why we in the United States do not hear much about Turkey. Although there are multiple possible answers, I think that in part we do not hear about Turkey because it defies easy categorization. Turkey does not fit neatly into either the box of the ‘West’ or the “Middle East.” In fact, on a recent trip to Turkey (March 2009), a Turkish professor noted how his country fell through the cracks in international affairs classes taught in Europe and North America. As an ‘Asian’ and ‘Muslim’ country, it is often excluded from classes of European politics, even though in its last decades the Ottoman Empire was considered the “Sick Man of Europe,” (due to its economic and territorial losses) and Turkey has been an associate member of the European Community since 1963. Yet Turkey is also commonly excluded from courses on Middle Eastern politics, since it is non-Arab, a member of NATO, has one foot in Europe, and escaped Western colonization. Turkey is a long-standing ally of the United States and of Israel—although the countries had experienced tension in their relationship in 2009, both have worked to prevent a crisis. Even though its GDP falls behind that of most European countries, Turkey has achieved greater economic success than

many of its Middle Eastern neighbors. Furthermore, Turkey has maintained a secular democracy since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. This is especially noteworthy given Israel's claims to being the "only democracy in the Middle East," a claim which necessarily excludes Turkey from Israel's definition of the region.

Turkey not only challenges our assumptions regarding the Middle East, but also challenges our assumptions about Western dominance. The Ottoman Empire was a powerful European neighbor, dominating the Balkans until it was defeated after the siege of Vienna in 1683 (Stoye, 2007). Byzantium, which was renamed Constantinople and then Istanbul, served as the center of the Eastern Orthodox Church, a rival to the Western Roman Empire. Turkey has a rich intellectual and economic history. The Islamic University in the city of Harran, outside of Sanliurfa, was established in the 7th century CE (the first European universities were not established until the end of the Middle Ages) (Pedersen, 1997), and the Silk Road went through that same area, linking the Orient with the Mediterranean. Even though modern Turkey is predominantly Muslim, it was the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire and played a pivotal role in the early history of the Christian Church. The Nicene Creed, for example, was drafted in the present day city of Iznik, and although their population is quite small today, a number of ancient monasteries dot the Turkish landscape (Dalrymple, 1997). When Jews were thrown out of Spain as a result of the Catholic Inquisition in the 15th century, the Sultan welcomed them into the Ottoman Empire, where Iberian Jews in particular achieved significant success (Rozen, 2002).

This ambiguous position can be a strength for Turkey, as it escapes easy classification and has ties to both East and West. As U.S. President Barack Obama stated to the Turkish Parliament during his visit in April 2009, which directly followed Obama's visit to Europe,

Turkey's greatness lies in your ability to be at the center of things. This is not where East and West divide—it is where they come together. In the beauty of your culture. In the richness of your history. In the strength of your democracy. In your hopes for tomorrow (Obama, 2009).

This quotation captures the integrative potential of Turkey and highlights its unique potential for contributing to today's global challenges. Precisely because of its ability to bridge 'East' and 'West', to be a Muslim majority country and a secular democracy, hold membership in NATO, and have connections to the rest of the Middle East due to its Ottoman past, Turkey has social ties that can be harnessed to engage constructively with a number of complex issues facing

policy makers. In particular, Turkey is well placed to provide guidance on the question of religiously-oriented (Islamic) parties and democracy, finding a way forward on issues of Middle East peace, and dealing with challenges of human security. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in a speech to the American Enterprise Institute in January 2004 emphasized exactly the value of Turkey's unique positionality:

That the Turkish society is predominantly Muslim, has not prevented Turkey from engaging in a comprehensive interaction with the West and from becoming an important member of Western institutions and organizations (Erdoğan, 2006).

In the sections that follow, I will explore the lessons that policy makers and scholars of international affairs can take from examining Turkey's experience at the crossroads of civilizations, as well as questions worth examining more carefully in future research.

Political Islam and Democracy

Numerous books have been written on Islam and democracy; these can be classified into two major subsets, one that examines whether Islam (the religion) is compatible with democracy and a second that asks whether religiously-oriented political groups (also called "political Islam" or "Islamist movements") are compatible with democracy. Whether or not the Islamic faith is compatible with democracy is a theological debate that remains contested by Islamic scholars of different persuasions. Depending on how one defines concepts like *tawhid* (the unity of God) or understands the parameters of *ijtihad* (informed interpretation), one can arrive at very different arguments regarding the compatibility of Islam and democracy. While some scholars argue that concepts such as *shura* (consultation) provide an avenue to Islamic democracy through governing councils or parliaments, others see the role of *shura* in a more limited manner, confined to educated clerics who give advice (Abou El Fadl, 2003; Esposito & Voll, 1996). Furthermore, many Western orientalis and Muslim extremists argue that Islam and democracy are fundamentally incompatible, although their explanations for why this is the case may vary (Ibrahim, 2007). Reduced to basic (if somewhat exaggerated) premises, the former argument suggests that Muslims are not 'civilized' enough for democracy, and the latter suggests democracy is a foreign import. Numerous scholars, 'Western' and 'Muslim' alike, have sought to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam through polling data and through surveys examining attitudes on a wide

range of issues (i.e. concern for human rights, leadership preferences, views on women's rights, role of minorities, etc.) related to democracy (Etzioni, 2008). Those analyzing these polls argue that there is nothing intrinsic to Islam that makes it incompatible with democracy, and in fact survey data from the Arab Barometer suggest that the durability of authoritarian rule in the Middle East is not the result of "Islamic culture," the "Arab mindset," or because democracy is a "foreign" concept (Etzioni, 2008; Jamal & Tessler, 2008).

A second argument on Islam and democracy argues that it is not Islamic culture or beliefs that explain the lack of democracy in the Middle East, but rather the socio-political and economic institutions of these countries. Such scholars note that ethnicity, nationality, and tribe can play a more crucial role in identity-formation than Islam for many, and that asking whether "Islam" is compatible with "democracy" overlooks the wide variety of religious traditions within Islam, as well as the wide-ranging geographic, social, and political scope of the Muslim world. For example, scholars and policy makers note that Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country in terms of population, and has made great strides toward democracy in the past decade, while India, a long-established democracy, has a large Muslim population (Brumberg, 2005; Ibrahim, 2007). Looking at actual political experience in Muslim-majority countries in terms of the electoral experience of Islamist² movements as well as the institutional framework, ideology, goals, and operating principles of Islamic movements and parties, scholars debate whether groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas use democratic processes instrumentally in order to gain power and impose *shari'a*, or whether engaging in the democratic process can have a moderating effect on such groups (Bergesen, 2008; Brumberg, 2005).

Bassam Tibi, for example, argues that Islamist movements are inherently undemocratic, although he affirms that Islam (the religion) and democracy are compatible in most cases, and acknowledges that some Islamic (as opposed to Islamist) parties can "represent a civil Islam" (Tibi, 2008, p. 44). Others assert that members of the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt have engaged in elections on numerous occasions and have played by the rules of democracy. In a review of five books exploring Islamist movements and elections, Vickie Langohr (2001) argues that the question of whether Islamist movements are democratic is inappropriate given that most of these movements are contesting elections in authoritarian contexts. Instead, she suggests, scholars should consider the possible gains Islamists can achieve by working within the political system, as well as factors that affect the choice of violent or nonviolent methods of achieving group aims. While a number of studies exploring whether Islamist movements engage in the procedure of democratic elections without commitment to the broader democratic project focus on Indonesia or Egypt, the Turkish case

is useful in exploring this question, which continues to be a critical one in contemporary Middle Eastern politics.

The AKP in Turkey

The Justice and Development Party (Adelet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) is a 'religiously-oriented' or 'conservative' party,³ which came to power in the 2002 parliamentary elections with 34.3% of the vote and was re-elected in 2007 with 47% of the vote, which gave the party 342 seats in Parliament. Part of the reason for the AKP's success in Turkey, where Kemalist secularism (defined as state control over religion and an absence of religious symbolism in public space, not the mere separation of church and state) is fiercely upheld by the military, stems from the party's moderation, pragmatism, and appeal to pious people rather than those seeking *shari'a* law (Ghanim, 2009). The party's view on the relationship between religion and politics is illustrated in the following quotation from Prime Minister Erdoğan:

While attaching importance to religion as a social value, we do not think it right to conduct politics through religion, to attempt to transform government ideologically by using religion, or to resort to organizational activities based on religious symbols. To make religion an instrument of politics and to adopt exclusive approaches to politics in the name of religion harms not only political pluralism but also religion itself (Erdoğan, 2006).

This emphasis on the religious *orientation* of the politicians in the party, and their commitment to social values grounded in Islamic beliefs, distinguishes the AKP from other political Islamist movements. Survey research indicates that more than four-fifths of the people in Turkey are tolerant of Islamic community groups, such as the Gülen movement, and differentiate between these pious movements and those deemed Islamist, which are seeking to shape political life in accordance with Islamic ideals (Heper, 2009). In fact, the AKP has not sought to overthrow Turkey's secular democracy, but rather has governed in accordance with its principles, and was re-elected in large part due to its success at delivering on campaign promises, such as prioritization of the economy (particularly economic change benefiting the conservative business community, or the so-called "Anatolian lions") and commitment to European Union accession (Ghanim, 2009; Kalaycioglu, 2007). Although the AKP did seek to lift the ban on headscarf-wearing women in higher education in February 2008, their efforts were to no avail, and the ban remains in place. The

headscarf-wearing wives of the prime minister and president have remained absent from public functions in accordance with state regulations barring the headscarf from government buildings and official functions.

Under the AKP, Turkey has carried out democratizing reforms that previous secularist governments were unable to implement. For example, the AKP has opened space for recognition of the Kurds, made it legal for teaching to occur in Kurdish, and initiated the first state-run Kurdish-language TV channel in January 2009. In addition, the government restrained the military and carried out a limited military operation vis-à-vis the PKK in Iraq rather than engaging in all out warfare. While political motives, such as a desire to restrict the political power of the military, which wields substantial power in the Turkish system, undoubtedly played a role in this decision, it also illustrates a commitment to secular democratic principles, in which the elected (civilian) government has oversight of military operations (Ghanim, 2009; Turan, 2007). The government's efforts to become more accountable to Kurdish concerns are also evident in its efforts to reach out to Kurdish cities during the 2009 election campaign and state-ordered excavations of mass graves resulting from the armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish military in the 1980s and 1990s. According to some commentators, the government's tough stance toward Ergenekon (which was deemed a terrorist organization in August 2009) has further boosted its Kurdish support (Ayhan, 2009; Staff, 2009).

Furthermore, many of those pious Turks who elected the AKP also demonstrate their commitment to secular democratic principles. The Gülen movement, for example, contributes to democracy through charitable donations to educational institutions and by providing food for the poor. On a March 2009 faculty trip to Turkey, we were hosted by numerous local business associations affiliated with the Gülen movement who spoke of their projects in the community. These civil associations are grounded in socially conservative values, but are progressive in orientation to educating the population by supporting those in need regardless of their background, and by focusing on community-level change rather than a national political system aligned with Islamic principles. In many frank discussions with these businessmen over dinner or with families in their homes, it was clear that secularism was a way of life for these pious individuals. While their political, social, and economic decisions were informed by their religious values, they upheld (and believed in) the separation between religion and politics. The educational and civic initiatives funded by these individuals and business associations further supports Turkish democracy by helping develop an informed, thoughtful populace as well as an actively engaged civil society.

Regional Significance of the AKP's democratic credentials

The importance of the AKP and its example in Turkey is critical precisely because of the many other Islamist movements that have engaged in the electoral process (often with very different results) throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Hamas won the majority of seats in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections and was promptly boycotted by the international community; Hezbollah has also held a significant share of Lebanon's Parliamentary seats, although its coalition gained only 57 seats (out of 128) in the June 2009 elections. Independents associated with the Muslim Brotherhood are the main opposition force in Egypt's parliament, with 88 of 454 seats. In contrast to the assumption of Tibi and others that Islamist parties use elections for instrumental ends, "[i]n power, the AKP has proven, so far at any rate, that there is no hidden agenda to Islamize Turkish society. Rather, they are investing in solving concrete socioeconomic and political problems" (Ghanim, 2009, p. 79). Although the 2002 election may have been a reaction *against* the previous government (much as the 2006 Palestinian vote was widely seen as a vote *against* Fatah's corruption and mis-rule rather than *for* Hamas), the 2007 re-election of the AKP resulted from their successful economic policies and moves for reform (Ghanim, 2009).

The experience of the AKP in Turkey demonstrates to both the West and Middle East, to secularists and Islamists, that there is nothing fundamentally incompatible between Islam and democracy. It also demonstrates that religiously-oriented parties *can* demonstrate commitment to secular principles and also bring about economic growth and socio-political reform favorable to democracy. Yet the AKP's experience also suggests that the best way to moderate or engage with religiously-oriented parties is to allow them to govern, and to force them to prove their capacity to deliver on their promise to the electorate. It was this opportunity to govern that was denied to Hamas in the wake of the 2006 elections, and so any of their failures could be blamed on the West or on Israel rather than owned by the organization. The pragmatism of the AKP is also possible precisely because of the broader political system and commitment to secular democracy, as well as the country's bid for joining the European Union, which requires certain reforms and a commitment to democracy. The sustained, on-going engagement with the West is important for the consolidation of Turkish reforms, as is the willingness of the military to refrain from intervention to overthrow the government. While other Middle Eastern countries may lack the historical and institutional commitment to secular democracy, the West can choose how it engages with these countries and their authoritarian leaders, as well as how it deals with the political opposition posed

by political Islamist groups. Likewise, the AKP can serve as a role model for political Islamic groups on how moderation and pragmatism can bring about political success, domestic reform, and economic gain.

Pursuing Peace in the Middle East

A second way in which Turkey's experience can be illustrative for policymakers considering approaches for dealing with contemporary global challenges is the relationship between Turkey and its neighbors. On our trip to Turkey in March 2009 we were hosted exceedingly generously by Turkish families, business associations, and community organizations who bestowed upon us magnificent hospitality. The hospitality given to us, we learned, was not the exception, but the norm; many of our hosts indicated that they receive close to sixty groups per year, welcoming these guests into their homes and workplaces for the purposes of dialogue, relationship-building, and mutual enrichment. Indeed, we learned a great deal from our Turkish hosts, and the personal encounters provided an opportunity for us all to serve as goodwill ambassadors for our respective countries. Yet more than that, we were able to learn first-hand some of the challenges and opportunities facing ordinary Turks in the course of their lives as we discussed a wide range of topics and asked one another questions about politics, culture, and society.

Our hosts demonstrated a genuine interest in learning about ordinary people from the West (although we were from the United States, they also host European groups), and recounted proverbs from the prophet Abraham highlighting the blessing bestowed upon one's home by guests. This desire to engage in dialogue with others is demonstrated in other, more official efforts at public diplomacy as well, such as Turkey's hosting of the UNESCO Alliance of Civilizations forum held in Istanbul in April 2009, or the Abrahamic Path initiative, which begins in the city of Sanliurfa and moves on to Harran in the southeastern part of Turkey (Teller, 2009). Turkey's public diplomacy looks both east and west to build understanding with a variety of others, another example of how Turkey is not either/or, but both. For example, while meeting with the head of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) in Ankara, we learned about a new channel they are developing that will be broadcast in a variety of Turkish languages, including Azeri, Uzbeki, and Turkmeni as a way of facilitating understanding between the Turkic peoples and Turkey. While in a sixth century Assyrian Orthodox church (The Forty Martyrs Church) in the ancient city of Mardin, we encountered a group of female Turkish students from Kirkuk, Iraq, wearing conservative Islamic dress, who are studying in Turkey. The priest sang a Lenten hymn to us in the Aramaic they use for worship; after singing in the

ancient language, he noted that a youth chorus from his congregation was about to travel to California for a cultural festival. This type of inter-faith, transnational engagement epitomized our brief stay in the Mardin area.

Engaging with the 'Other' Next Door

Mardin is a small city on the slope of a hill overlooking the Mesopotamian plains and close to the border of Syria. It is a mixed community in both national and religious terms, with Kurds, Assyrians, Arabs, and Turks as well as Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis all living together. Over dinner one member of the local community talked about the history of inter-faith, inter-communal mixing and peaceful relations that existed in the area. When we asked the secret to Mardin's success, we were told that part of the answer comes from living in small houses one on top of the other. When you go to sweep your roof or clear your walk, you encounter your neighbor, you interact and exchange greetings. Then, when you go away and need someone to watch after your house, you ask your neighbors rather than contacting someone else in your family or your religious/national community from farther away. This daily interaction and inter-weaving combined with a respect for each others' traditions builds community and facilitates harmony. This lesson of reaching out to the other within our own community—making the effort to know one's neighbor—is of direct relevance to an increasingly integrated world, when the Global South and the Global North can be found within any country you visit. Due to immigration, transnational trade, and the globalization of services, we all have neighbors with different traditions than our own.

The example of Mardin goes beyond simple neighborliness, however, to illustrate the historical and present significance of Turkey in regards to the alliance of civilizations. One of the men we had dinner with traces his roots back to the seventh century with the expansion of Islam under the Caliph Omar. Speaking with me in Arabic, he explained that he is a Turk, but he is also an Arab, and that for him there is no contradiction. The educational institution he works with does humanitarian outreach and supports the poor in the community regardless of religion or ethnic background. In addition to Turks and Kurds, Mardin also has a large Kurdish population, which our hosts emphasized was not a problem; they serve whoever is in need, and the community relations that result from this mutual aid are strong. Mardin's pluralism does not result from mere chance. The city lies along the ancient Silk Road, and was part of both the Byzantine and early Islamic empires; several of those we spoke with even called the area "Northern Mesopotamia," signaling a connection with modern-day Iraq. Our encounter with the Turkish Iraqi students in the Forty Martyrs' Church and the NATO installation on the citadel above the town (used for Iraqi and Syrian surveillance)

also reminded us of the area's strategic location.

Israeli-Syrian Negotiations

Turkey is well-placed to support efforts of Middle East peace, precisely because of its location as a physical bridge between Europe and Asia, its strong economic, strategic, and political ties with Israel and its shared history, culture, and religion with the Arab world. Turkey was the second country to recognize Israel after the United States, and the countries trade close to \$3 billion dollars annually. Since the election of the AKP, Turkey has played an increasingly important role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, which it previously avoided. Specifically, Turkey was mediating indirect talks between Syria and Israel, until relations cooled as a result of the December 2008-January 2009 conflict in Gaza (Operation "Cast Lead"). Turkey has also played a role in facilitating talks between Palestinian factions. Although the Syrian-Israeli talks have been put on hold, and Turkish-Israeli relations experienced a bit of a chill when Prime Minister Erdoğan walked off stage during a January 2009 debate with Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos (Bennhold, 2009), the incident did not result in any significant economic or diplomatic shifts, and by the end of July 2009 Turkey indicated it was once more ready to re-launch talks between Damascus and Jerusalem (Nahmias, 2009). At a May 2009 talk on Israeli-Turkish relations, Israeli Consul General Reda Mansour spoke optimistically of the possibility for peace between Syria and Israel in 2009 and identified a key role for Turkey in that process. Ambassador Mansour highlighted the significance of Turkish-Israeli relations not only on the official level, but also on the social level, as Turkey is the prime overseas vacation spot for Israeli tourists. For Israel, Turkey serves as an "honest broker" in part due to its own history of strained relations with Syria; Israel's key concerns mirror those that stood between Turkey and Syria (terrorism and territorial debates) (Mansour, 2009).

In July 2009 Turkey sought to expand its mediating role even further, suggesting that the next round of Palestinian reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas be moderated by Turkey rather than Egypt (Isaacharoff, 2009). While this suggestion may be partly based in regional power politics, and Turkey's desire to assert itself vis-à-vis Egypt, it also reflects an increased willingness on the part of Turkey to engage in regional politics beyond its own borders. Such moves break with Ataturk's tradition of "peace at home, peace in the world" reflect the changing nature of global politics as well as the transnational character of terrorism and other security dilemmas, which mean that sometimes states need to promote peace in the world to achieve peace at home.

Turkey's focus on dialogue, seeking to understand the other, and efforts to mediate between rival parties in the region provides an alternative model

for peacemaking, one based in talking and exchange rather than exclusion or invasion. Turkey's more recent approach to dealing with the Kurdish issue through democratization efforts and socioeconomic development (as epitomized in the Southeastern Anatolian Project, or GAP) rather than military might and cultural repression not only enhances Turkish security, but its restraint in dealing with the PKK in Iraq also reduced existing friction between Iraq, Turkey, and the United States (Ghanim, 2009).

Facing Contemporary Security Challenges

Security—in all its forms—is a third area in which an examination of Turkey is important for thinking about contemporary global challenges. As has already been mentioned, Turkey's location is strategic not only because it is a bridge between Europe and Asia, but also because it controls the Bosphorus Straits, shares a border with Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and is a key source of oil, gas, and water for the region (Cyr, 2009). Over 40% of Israel's oil, for example, passes through Turkey (Mansour, 2009), and Turkey's role as a through-country for vital energy resource on their way to Europe is a key leveraging factor for Turkey in its relationship with the European Union (Bacik, 2006). The Ankara signing of an intergovernmental transit agreement regarding the Nabucco pipeline in July 2009 was heralded as a major event (Traynor, 2009). Pipeline politics involve a number of strategic concerns for the world community. Not only have recent years highlighted the limited availability of non-renewable energy sources (such as gas and oil) but with the rise in demand from emerging market countries—particularly China and India—consumers have experienced a surge in cost, as well as the threat of a constricted supply. Identity politics also play a role, as Kurdish groups have targeted Turkish pipelines, for example.

Concerns about Iran and its nuclear program also involves Turkey, as Iran wishes to transport its oil through the Nabucco project—a 3,300-kilometer pipeline to carry natural gas to Western Europe via Turkey.⁴ Given current concerns—particularly from Israel and the United States—regarding Iran's objectives, Turkey's strong connections with all three major players—Iran, Israel, and the United States, provide it with the opportunity to exert leverage and play a vital role in reaching a negotiated arrangement. Turkey's water resources provide another area where Turkey has strategic leverage given the importance of water in the region. The dams, reservoirs, and canals constructed as part of the GAP have been a source of some tension with Turkey's downstream neighbors, notably Syria and Iraq, but water resources also have the potential for helping with peacebuilding endeavors, not only in Syrian-Israeli negotiations, where the water resource of the Golan Heights is at play, but also between Israel and the

Palestinians (Khoury & Abdel-Samad, 2006; Mango, 2004).

A third area in which Turkey plays an important role in contemporary security challenges is in the future of Iraq, particularly in light of impending U.S. troop withdrawal. The United States has been in discussions with Turkey over using Turkey as an exit route as it moves soldiers, equipment, and munitions out of Iraq, and given Turkey's experiences in the 1991 Gulf War (as well as its concerns with the United States' 2003 invasion), this is likely to be an ongoing discussion. Regardless, Turkey will have a role to play in helping stabilize the region after the United States withdraws given Turkey's long standing concern with regional Kurdish policy and the cross-border attacks that have been launched by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkey's ties with the Turkmen in Kirkuk and other areas of northern Iraq also indicate the importance of Iraqi policy in Ankara (AlTunisik, 2006). The March 2009 visit by Turkish president Abdullah Gul to Iraq was the first such visit in 33 years, and they did not shy away from sensitive topics, such as the role of the PKK, the status of the mixed city of Kirkuk, and water sharing (BBC, 2009).

Given that much of the current Turkish government's approach to security issues has involved a liberal economic agenda—cementing relationships through trade—the economic downturn may pose a challenge to Turkish domestic foreign policy. Socioeconomic development through the irrigation and energy projects associated with the GAP have been one arm of the government's handling of the Kurdish issue, and trade—not to mention the economic benefits of tourism—has been critical to the Turkish-Israeli relationship. Recent efforts to deepen relations with Iraq and Iran have both involved commitments to boost trade as well as strategic resources such as oil, gas, or water. The emphasis on trade and dialogue—as evidenced in the Alliance of Civilizations forum held in Istanbul in April 2009—demonstrates that security can be approached through non-military means. However, the strategic importance of Turkey in terms of military cooperation with Israel and the United States might put Turkey in a tough position vis-à-vis its internal political struggles between the secularist military leadership and the religiously-oriented government over the definition of Turkey's secular democracy.

Conclusion

Often overlooked by those studying "Europe" or the "Middle East" because of its unique status bridging the two, Turkey is worthy of study for insight into key contemporary challenges involving how to engage with political Islamic movements (throughout the world), building peace and democracy in the Middle East, and regional security concerns in Iraq and Iran. Although Turkey faces numerous challenges of its own—such as the Cyprus issue, the "events of

1915” (also known as the Armenian genocide), and the Ergenekon trials—if it continues to approach these issues in the syncretic manner it has proven itself capable of, there is reason for cautious optimism.

As the European Union and Turkey continue with the accession talks, several factors are important to consider. Turkey is a diverse country just as Europe is diverse; there are millions of Muslims in Europe, not only the result of immigration, but also from those native to Eastern Europe. The experience of Turks in Europe demonstrates the capability and commitment of Turks to engage in the democratic process. Indeed, the different relationships between Turkish political movements and government structures in the Netherlands and Germany reflect the differences between the two political systems and the options available to Turkish groups (Eickelman, 2009; Yukleyen, 2009). Turkey is a long-time member of NATO, and Turkey (along with Greece) was a prime beneficiary of the Truman Doctrine that sought to support democracies in the face of communist aggression. For many Turks, the question of European Union accession is not about “joining” Europe, but about being re-integrated into the continent. With its long history of connection to southeastern Europe in particular, as well as the many Turks of European descent, Europe does not seem “foreign” to the Turks in quite the same way as Turkey is viewed by some European countries. Furthermore, Turkey has a different relationship with the “West” than do other Middle Eastern countries since it was never colonized by European powers and successfully resisted European occupation after World War I.

Turkey also illustrates the importance of economic growth to democratization, freedom of thought, and identity politics. Much of the new entrepreneurial middle class in Turkey is from traditional religious roots, and as they have risen in power and status, they have maintained their piety while also exerting more influence in both political and economic arenas. While the religious entrepreneurs (the Anatolian Lions) have maintained their concern for conservative social values, they have also demonstrated their willingness to adapt and change in accordance with global trends as well as to blur distinctions between “East” and “West” (Tavernise, 2009). Changes in the veiling industry—where large corporations market fashionable head scarves to an upwardly mobile clientele—as well as pressure to change regulations banning the veil in university classrooms—are one example of this trend (Gokariksel & Secor, 2009). The liberal economic agenda of the ruling AKP also demonstrates the fact that religiously-oriented parties can in fact be compatible with capitalism, economic development, and democracy.

Scholars of international politics should pay more attention to Turkey precisely because it does not fit into neat categories of “Western” or “Eastern” or of “religious” or “secular.” By studying how Turkey negotiates its unique identity, particularly when it leverages its pluralistic identity for the promotion of peace

and security, we can all learn how to better engage with the diversity of economic, social, and political exchanges in the global era. Situated at the crossroads of civilizations and in the heart of contemporary conflicts (energy, water, Arab-Israeli, and Iraq), Turkey play a key role in efforts to find solutions to today's pressing concerns.

Endnotes

¹ This paper emerges out of a talk given to the Atlanta Council on International Relations (ACIR) in April 2009.

² The terminology surrounding this phenomenon is highly problematic as it is framed by Western scholars and there is not a comparable term used within the Muslim world because Islam is a religion that speaks to religious, political, economic, and social affairs. For more on the range of terminology (i.e. "Islamic fundamentalism," "political Islam," and "Islamism" among others) and the associated problems with each of these terms, see (ICG, 2005; Mandaville, 2007).

³ Tibi contests this, arguing that the AKP is "intolerant" towards secularists and non-Muslims and incomparable to conservative religious parties in Germany, for example (Tibi, 2008, p. 46).

⁴ This issue has been raised by Iranian ministers with their German counterparts. See http://www.iranian.ws/iran_news/publish/article_29330.shtml (retrieved May 14, 2009). Israel is also concerned about a trade protocol signed in April 2009 between Turkey and Iran that would boost their bilateral trade to \$20 billion.

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