

Turkey

National Affairs

THE TERM OF President Ahmet Necdet Sezer was due to end in July 2007, and speculation about his successor heightened tension between the secularist traditions of modern Turkey and the rising popularity of political Islam. The leading candidate was Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, whose extensive experience, both in domestic politics and foreign affairs, qualified him for the post. But all previous presidents, including Sezer, had been staunch secularists, whereas Gül was a founding member of the ruling *Adalet ve Kalkınma* (Justice and Development) Party, known by its initials as AKP, which had come to power in the 2002 elections.

Militant secularists in Turkey as well as a good number of European leaders thought the AKP harbored a hidden Islamist agenda, a suspicion strengthened by the fact that Gül's wife wore a headscarf. They feared that the AKP planned ultimately to consolidate its power not only by gaining control of the presidency, but also by taking over the country's educational and administrative bureaucracy and imposing sharia, Islamic law, on Turkey. It was indeed true that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP leader, had, as mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s, sought certain Islamist objectives, but he had been careful not to do so since assuming national power, knowing full well that the Turkish military leadership—which saw itself as a defender of the republic's secular values—had removed governments or forced changes in them four times since 1960.

AKP spokesmen insisted that their party was a progressive¹ but socially conservative mainstream group that was no more Islamist than the Christian Democratic parties of Western Europe were fundamentalist Christian bodies. The AKP had spearheaded Turkey's efforts to join the European Union, adopting a wide variety of reform measures to satisfy the EU's entry requirements, but so far to no avail. The objections to an AKP president, the party claimed, were one more indication—along with the persistent European resistance to Turkey's entry into the EU—that European leaders considered Christianity an essential component of the continent's civilization, and that Turkey, no matter what it did, would never be accepted into the “club.”

On April 12, 2006, President Sezer issued a public warning about what he considered the Islamist threat, saying: "Religious fundamentalism has reached alarming proportions. Turkey's only guarantee against this threat is its secular order." This statement was followed by massive public demonstrations in the major cities, including Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara. Hundreds of thousands of people—more than a million, according to some estimates—turned out, carrying Turkish flags with the star and crescent, together with large photos of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the secular state, and large banners carrying messages like "No imam in Çankaya [site of the presidential palace]!" Significantly, many demonstrators carried signs saying, "No to sharia and no to a [military] coup," in other words rejecting both religious and secular extremes.

Turkish secularists in fact faced a dilemma. They certainly did not want to see the country turn into another Islamic state, and yet a coup by the generals to prevent such an eventuality would suggest that Turkey lacked the democratic safeguards to assure the supremacy of civilian authorities over the military, and was therefore not ready to join the EU.

To a great extent, secularists were victims of the Turkish electoral system. Under present law, only parties receiving at least 10 percent of the total vote could enter the Grand National Assembly, the country's parliament, and the ballots of those voting for parties that did not achieve that threshold were disregarded. As a result of the plethora of small parties that could not garner 10 percent, the AKP's share of parliamentary seats far exceeded its percentage of the popular vote. Indeed, with the exception of a score of seats won by individuals running as independents, the only party other than the AKP in parliament was the staunchly secularist Republican People's Party (CHP), which had been founded by Atatürk himself. Efforts were ongoing to merge small parties, or at least to forge a combined electoral list from among the secular parties. Fierce personal and ideological rivalries had so far prevented this.

Israel and the Middle East

Some observers considered Turkey's relations with Israel as a litmus test of the AKP's ability to follow a pragmatic foreign policy not clouded by Islamic religious sentiment. Turkish-Israeli ties, underpinned by growing trade and defense cooperation, were among the oldest and strongest in the region. Upon assuming office in 2003, however, Prime Minister Erdoğan spurned invitations to come to Israel, saying he was too busy. In 2004, reacting to Israel's killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmad

Yassin, Erdoğan publicly accused Israel of perpetrating state terrorism against the Palestinians. This remark was not necessarily an expression of Islamist fervor, as it differed little from the reaction of his secularist predecessor, Bülent Ecevit, in 2002, after Israeli military action in the Palestinian city of Jenin (see AJYB 2003, p. 289).

Erdoğan, accompanied by some 200 businessmen, journalists, and advisors, finally paid an official visit to Israel (and the Palestinian Territories) in early May 2005. *Ha'aretz* headlined its editorial about the visit "A New Friendship." While in Israel, the Turkish leader declared that anti-Semitism was "a crime against humanity" and that Iran's nuclear ambitions were a threat not just to Israel but to "the entire world." Officials both in Turkey and Israel denied reports in the international media that Erdoğan's visit was aimed at mending ties with the Jewish state, claiming that there had never been a lapse in good relations. Erdoğan himself told the *Turkish Daily News*, on the eve of his trip, that a "solid and time-honored bond" existed between the two countries. "Our strong relationship with Israel does not preclude us from making frank criticisms. Turkey has always condemned terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians as well as any excessive and indiscriminate use of force by the Israeli side," the prime minister said.

Erdoğan offered his services as a mediator between Israel and the Palestinians. Clearly, his initiative was aimed at furthering Turkey's desire to play a major role in the region. Turkey, with an annual \$2 billion in bilateral Turkish-Israeli trade, around \$3 billion in arms purchases from Israel over the past three years, and a historic record of friendly relations with both Israel and the Palestinians, was indeed well situated to facilitate negotiations. Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, for his part, praised Turkish efforts to promote regional peace.

It was also widely assumed that the Erdoğan visit was connected with Turkish attempts, at the time, to improve bilateral relations with the U.S., which had been hurt on March 1, 2003, when the Turkish parliament turned down an American request to use the country as a staging ground for the Iraq war, and again in April 2005, when President Sezer paid an ill-advised visit to Damascus just as the Syrians were being pressured to leave Lebanon. Turkish public opinion had turned strongly anti-American since the accession to power of the AKP; a Pew Center survey in July 2006 showed that only 12 percent of Turks viewed America "positively," a significant decline from the more than 50 percent who had felt that way in the 1990s.

Turkish leaders had always appreciated—and in fact often exaggerated—

the political clout of the pro-Israel or "Jewish" lobby in the U.S., and had sought help from the organized American Jewish community in countering the pro-Greek and pro-Armenian lobbies, which had sometimes sought to restrict American aid to Turkey. American Jewish leaders and Israeli officials had also been active behind the scenes in supporting Turkey's earlier efforts to be admitted to the European Economic Community and, now, to join the EU. Erdoğan's well-publicized trip to Israel would go over well in American pro-Israel circles.

Even so, Turkey's Middle East policy remained ambiguous. On January 4, 2006, during a visit to Israel and Palestine, Foreign Minister Gül stopped in Ramallah to meet with Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qurei. He told Qurei that to help the Palestinians "stand on their own two feet economically" Ankara would donate \$5 million toward the rehabilitation and reopening of the Erez Industrial Zone in the Gaza Strip, along the border with Israel. An estimated 10,000 jobs would be created by the Turkish companies that were planning to invest there, in the town of Beit Hanun. Palestinian-Israeli clashes over the previous five years had resulted in frequent closings of the industrial zone. Soon after, however, Prime Minister Erdoğan hosted Khaled Meshaal, a Hamas leader based in Damascus. Despite criticism from the West and from pro-Western Turks, the AKP defended the visit and maintained contact with Meshaal. The government also opposed Western efforts to isolate Hamas.

In the summer of 2006, violence erupted on the Lebanese-Israeli frontier. Israeli civilian settlements were shelled and Hezbollah forces killed eight Israelis and kidnapped an Israeli soldier, taking him across the border into Lebanon. Israel then launched heavy bombardments against buildings in Beirut and southern Lebanon believed to be harboring Palestinian fighters and Shi'ite Lebanese militants. It was widely believed that Syria was encouraging the renewed hostilities.

The Turkish media prominently displayed images of dead and wounded Arab women and children provided by Arab television stations. Islamic groups organized an anti-Israel rally in Istanbul in the early days of the war that drew almost 100,000 people. Prime Minister Erdoğan and other officials issued statements harshly condemning the Israeli actions as excessive and indiscriminate violence, the prime minister going so far as to accuse Israel of seeking to "wipe out the Palestinians" in Lebanon. Some observers viewed this Turkish reaction as another sign that the government—for all its protestations of maintaining good relations with the Jewish state—considered solidarity with the Muslim world more important than ties with Israel.

A cease-fire in southern Lebanon was declared on August 14. Two days later, Foreign Minister Gül embarked on a fact-finding mission to the region. After a few days of talks in Beirut he went on to Israel and the Palestinian Territories, where he met with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and Defense Minister Amir Peretz of Israel, and with PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas and foreign policy advisor Saeb Erekat. Gül emphasized to both sides that Ankara's objective was to establish a permanent and lasting peace. He then traveled to Damascus where, on August 22, he had a 90-minute meeting with President Bashar Assad and his advisors. Gül reportedly told the Syrians that Turkey expected them to stop the flow of arms to Hezbollah and to pressure it to comply fully with the cease-fire.

There was considerable discussion, both within the country and in foreign capitals, about whether Turkey should contribute troops to the proposed UN multinational peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon. Beginning with the Korean War, Turkey had participated in many such operations, and since 2001 had deployed some 1,700 soldiers in Afghanistan as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Many argued that as a Muslim yet Western-oriented nation, Turkey was well positioned to act as a buffer between Israel and Hezbollah. Israel expressed opposition to participation by Muslim countries that did not recognize it, such as Malaysia and Bangladesh, but would welcome Turkey.

The plan aroused much criticism. Devlet Bahçeli, chairman of the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), opposed participation, stating that Turkish forces should instead be used to suppress Kurdish separatist forces. He charged that sending troops to southern Lebanon would "launch Turkey into a dangerous adventure which will drag it into the Middle East maelstrom." Also opposed was the Deniz Baykal, leader of the secularist Republican People's Party (CHP). He asserted that a total of 731 Turkish troops had already lost their lives in such missions, and that "no one can guarantee that Turkish soldiers will not face clashes" this time. Even President Sezer, whose post was largely ceremonial, spoke out strongly against the idea on the grounds that it was not Turkey's responsibility "to protect the interests of other countries."

The government, however, was under considerable pressure from the U.S. and the EU to contribute men to the international force, and hoped that by cooperating it might enhance the country's international stature and strengthen the case for Turkish accession to the EU. Foreign Minister Gül answered the parliamentary critics by emphasizing that the Turk-

ish soldiers would open fire only if attacked, and that they would not be expected to disarm Hezbollah. After a lengthy and stormy debate, the Grand National Assembly, on September 5, approved by 340 to 192 a motion to send troops to southern Lebanon to help monitor the tense ceasefire. The number of troops was not specified in the motion, but the foreign minister said it was unlikely to exceed 1,000. While the parliament deliberated, thousands protested outside, carrying banners and placards against the move.

The Turkish contribution to the UN mission in Lebanon was expected to include a naval task force patrolling the eastern Mediterranean to prevent arms smuggling, as well as officers to train Lebanese troops. According to the resolution that was passed, Turkey would also provide sea and air transport in support of other national contingents in the UN force.

In the end, Turkey was not the sole predominantly Muslim state to participate. The small Persian Gulf country of Qatar, which had maintained limited contacts with Israel since 1991, pledged 200–300 troops on September 3. And after Israel dropped its objections, the very large and populous state of Indonesia, which had no relations with Israel, said it would send up to 1,000 troops.

On August 30, a ship pulled into Beirut harbor transporting a Turkish humanitarian relief convoy of 50 fully loaded trucks containing 575 tons of food, cleaning materials, baby food, and emergency aid materials, which were handed over to Lebanese authorities the following morning. The aid convoy had been organized by the Istanbul-based Humanitarian Aid Foundation (IHH in Turkish). Speaking at its arrival, Turkey's ambassador to Lebanon, Irfan Acar, said that the IHH had been sending aid to Lebanon since shortly after hostilities began. He claimed that Turkey had been one of the countries sending the most help: \$1 million directly from the government; \$4 million from the Red Crescent Society; and \$6–\$7 million from a variety of nongovernmental organizations. The IHH immediately began work on the reconstruction of schools and hospitals damaged or destroyed during the fighting.

Economic ties between Turkey and Israel continued to flourish. In April, there were reports, subsequently confirmed, of negotiations between the two countries for the construction of a multimillion-dollar energy-and-water project. It would transport from Turkey water, electricity, natural gas, and oil via four underwater pipelines to Israel, from where the oil would be transferred by tankers to the Far East. The scope of this project would greatly exceed previous plans for Turkey to

export 50 million cubic meters of water annually to Israel using large tankers, which had been canceled in 2005 because it was prohibitively expensive. "The whole premise is based on the assumption that Turkey is becoming a major hub for energy in the region," said Gabby Levy, director of international relations at Israel's National Infrastructure Ministry. The water would be earmarked for Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Jordan, all of which suffered from chronic shortages. The project, which needed foreign economic backing, was undergoing a feasibility study sponsored by the Luxembourg-based European Investment Bank.

Over the previous decade and a half, nearly 100 smaller bilateral agreements had been signed between Israel and Turkey, many of them in the fields of arms, tourism, and agriculture. Turkey had also become a top vacation spot for Israelis, 380,000 of them visiting the country during 2005. So well-known had the Israeli penchant for vacationing there become that terrorists were drawn there as well. In the summer of 2005, a Syrian linked to Al Qaeda was caught off the Turkish coast with 750 kilograms of explosives. He explained to his captors that he had planned to pack speedboats with the explosives and ram them into Israeli cruise ships "without harming Turkish civilians." In early 2006 a Turkish television station reported that Taliban leader Mullah Omar had put up \$50,000 to pay for the aborted attack.

Another Middle East hot spot of great concern to Turkey was neighboring Iraq, where elections held after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime produced a government whose president, Jalal Talabani, and foreign minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, were both Kurds. Turkish authorities and military leaders watched with growing anxiety the resurgence of popular support for the PKK, the Kurdish separatist group, both in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. In Istanbul, Foreign Minister Gül signed a declaration together with Iraqi representatives on May 1, 2005, pledging to support a federal structure for Iraq "if that is what the Iraqi people decide." Nevertheless, military circles in Turkey were increasingly calling for a major cross-border action to eliminate PKK bases in northern Iraq.

Anti-Semitism

While there had always been anti-Semitic articles and cartoons in the publications of fringe groups—the ultranationalist and fundamentalist Islamic right—observers noted an alarming infiltration of anti-Jewish motifs in the mainstream media in the wake of the war in southern

Lebanon. This was the case even in some of the more liberal and secular papers, such as *Milliyet*.

Another indication of anti-Semitism (and anti-Americanism) was the immense popularity of the film *Kurtlar Vadisi—Irak* (Valley of the Wolves—Iraq). Set in northern Iraq, it portrayed U.S. troops in an extremely negative light, and depicted an American Jewish army doctor surgically removing organs from Iraqi prisoners so they could be sold for profit by U.S. troops. The movie also did well in other countries with significant Turkish-speaking minorities, such as Germany (see below, pp. 464–65).

JEWISH COMMUNITY

The Turkish Jewish community was estimated to number between 20,000 and 25,000 people. Precise figures were not available since official Turkish statistics no longer included data on religion or ethnic identity. By far the largest organized Jewish community was in Istanbul and its suburbs, and the second largest was in Izmir. Smaller communities, with fewer than 100 Jews in each, were in Ankara, Adana, Bursa, and Antakia, the Turkish name for the ancient city of Antioch.

The leadership of the Jewish community was vested in its president, currently Sylvio Ovadya, and a lay council. There was also a smaller religious council, which assisted *Hahambaşı* (Chief Rabbi) Isak Haleva. In early January 2006, Rabbi Haleva went to Jerusalem to participate in the Sixth General Assembly of Orthodox Jewish Leadership. In his address, the rabbi said that the Jewish community's international contacts could be helpful in Turkey's efforts to become a member of the EU.

In April 2005, the small but impressive new Turkish Jewish Museum finally opened in the heart of downtown Istanbul. With bilingual signs in Turkish and English, the museum chronicled the Jewish community's long history and wide range of accomplishments in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. The museum board was chaired by Naim Güteryüz, who had played a leading role in organizing the activities of the Quincentennial Foundation, created in 1992 to mark the 500th anniversary of the welcome given by Sultan Beyazit II to the Jews fleeing the Inquisition and expulsion from Spain in 1492. Another recent development was the complete renovation of the Or-Ahayim Jewish Hospital in Balat, transforming it into a modern geriatric center.

On the educational front, enrollment in the modern Jewish day school

in Istanbul was over 600, and there were several new Jewish kindergartens. A network of youth centers and sports clubs continued to serve the community.

Salom, the Jewish weekly published in the Turkish language, now also included a section in Ladino (Judeo-Espagnol). Many of the articles in the Ladino section were written for younger readers as part of the community's effort to preserve and transmit the Sephardi heritage to the next generation.

In November 2005, Ankara University for the first time hosted an international conference on a Jewish theme, a three-day event titled "Sephardi Culture and History." Participating were some 60 prominent scholarly experts from Turkish and foreign universities. Among the sponsors were the Ibero-American Friendship and Culture Society, the Spanish embassy, the Cervantes Institute, and the host institution, Ankara University. Such events were extremely important for the Jewish community, reassuring it that whatever political and ideological tensions roiled Turkey, the Jewish cultural and religious heritage was respected in the country.