

EXTREMISM IN ERDOĞAN'S AKP

**COUNTER
EXTREMISM
PROJECT**

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The Justice and Development Party (AKP) rose to power in the context of multiple tensions that have strained Turkey since the creation of the Turkish republic in the early 1920s. Modern Turkey has been divided in many respects—divided between residents of cities and rural areas, between supporters of secularism and adherents to religion and tradition, between those who embrace Westernization and those who oppose it, between advocates for liberal democracy and backers of a deep state.¹ The AKP has succeeded politically where its Islamist predecessors failed because it has skillfully navigated and exploited those divisions.

This report explores extremist trends and thinking within the AKP and their impact on freedom and democracy in Turkey. The report will first describe the background of Islamism in Turkey, including the Islamist parties that preceded the AKP. It will then discuss the founding and initial stated ideology of the AKP, before examining its initial years in power and then its authoritarian turn.

Islamism in Turkey Before the AKP

The simplest definition of Islamism is the employment of Islam not simply as a religion but as a political ideology. Ihsan Yilmaz says that “Islamism is the instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations in order to pursue political objectives... Islamists believe that Islam is the solution to every problem in the modern world.”²

Islamism in Turkey developed in the late 19th century as a response to the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The “Young Ottomans” group, which Yilmaz describes as “proto-Islamists,” opposed “Ottoman authoritarianism” and supported political pluralism and democracy guaranteed by a constitution.³ Seeking legitimacy for their agenda, they argued that these liberal principles, including constitutionalism, were found in Islam.⁴ While Sultan Abdulhamid II “alternatively suppressed and co-opted the Young Ottomans,” the assumption of dictatorial power by the secular nationalist “Young Turks” put an end to this early Islamist project.⁵

Following the collapse of the empire, a group led by Field Marshal Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established an authoritarian republic, with Atatürk as president. Atatürk’s ideology, commonly known as Kemalism, dictated the imposition of top-down secularism, nationalism, and Westernization as the antidote to the perceived failure of Islamic rule to sustain Turkey’s empire.

¹ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 33, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

² Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 104.

³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 105.

⁴ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 105–06.

⁵ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 106.

Such Westernization included the use of the Latin alphabet for the Turkish language instead of the Arabic one and the removal of Persian and Arabic words from the Turkish language.⁶

Kemalism did not imply the separation of religion and state but rather the subordination of religion to a secular state and the exclusion of religion from public life—closer to the French *laïcité* model than the American system.⁷ The Turkish republic abolished the sultanate and caliphate and placed regulation of Sunni Islamic practice under the control of a government institution called the Diyanet.⁸ The government controlled mosques and required that the call to Muslim prayer be issued in Turkish, not in the traditional Arabic.⁹ “Progressive” Islam was encouraged instead of “regressive” Islam.¹⁰ Women could not study at universities while wearing headscarves. Traditional independent religious brotherhood organizations were forbidden, and religious schools were closed, with students forced to go abroad for an Islamic education.¹¹ (Counter to the Kemalists’ intentions, some of these students became indoctrinated in the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology and imported it when they returned to Turkey.)¹² Islamist organizations and activities were criminalized, and Islamists were expelled from parliament.¹³ All this was mandated by the authoritarian government—a “revolution from above”—with little buy-in from average Turks—particularly rural ones that adhered closely to Islamic traditions and were left feeling marginalized by their rulers.¹⁴ A Kemalist slogan stated that the authorities governed “for the people, despite the people.”¹⁵

However, the Kemalists’ authoritarian secular agenda collided with their desire after World War II to join the Western alliance. In order to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Turkey

⁶ Nilüfer Göle, “Secularism and Islamism in Turkey: The Making of Elites and Counter-Elites,” *Middle East Journal* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 50; Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁷ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 108; Nilüfer Göle, “Secularism and Islamism in Turkey: The Making of Elites and Counter-Elites,” *Middle East Journal* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 48.

⁸ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 11–12, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 107–08; Svante E. Cornell, “The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey,” Hudson Institute, September 3, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>.

⁹ Nilüfer Göle, “Secularism and Islamism in Turkey: The Making of Elites and Counter-Elites,” *Middle East Journal* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 50.

¹⁰ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 108.

¹¹ Svante E. Cornell, “The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey,” Hudson Institute, September 3, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>.

¹² Svante E. Cornell, “The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey,” Hudson Institute, September 3, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>.

¹³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 103.

¹⁴ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 32, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

¹⁵ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

had to introduce a multi-party system, forcing politicians to compete for votes and appeal to long-ignored rural and traditional constituencies.¹⁶ In order to combat Communism at home, a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” was imposed: Turkish leaders reintroduced Islam into the national educational curriculum, and religious brotherhoods were permitted to function openly once more.¹⁷ Schools (*Imam-Hatip*) were created to train religious functionaries.¹⁸ And economic reforms facilitated the rise of a new middle class, the “Anatolian bourgeoisie,” with Muslim roots.¹⁹

Initially, this led to the integration of devout Muslims into broad-based conservative nationalist political parties.²⁰ However, an Islamist movement was created in the mid-1960s that opposed Kemalism and Westernization, called for a return to traditional Muslim values and governance, and delegitimized their political opponents as enemies of “good Muslims” and as tools of the West (which, in turn, was purportedly a tool of world Zionists).²¹ The movement, *Milli Görüş* (National Outlook, or NOM)—and the various political parties that emerged from it—exploited the Kemalists’ lack of success in reaching rural areas and feelings of victimhood amongst the rural masses.²²

The founder of this new Islamist movement was Necmettin Erbakan, an engineer-turned-politician who de facto headed each Islamist party save for the AKP.²³ He came from the

¹⁶ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 108; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 35,

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

¹⁷ Svante E. Cornell, “The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey,” Hudson Institute, September 3, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 37, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

¹⁸ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 19], https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

¹⁹ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 38, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf; Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

²⁰ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 109–10.

²¹ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 103, 109–10; Svante E. Cornell, “The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey,” Hudson Institute, September 3, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 40, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

²² Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 103; Svante E. Cornell, “The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey,” Hudson Institute, September 3, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 40, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

²³ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 31, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

Naqshbandi Sufi order (which, unique among Sufis, adhered to orthodox Islamic views) and received the blessing of prominent Sufi Islamist sheikh Mehmet Zahid Kotku to found the first Islamist political party in Turkey.²⁴ His movement romanticized the Ottoman Empire and believed, as Yilmaz describes, that the empire fell because of “decay in religious faith, traditions, and culture, as a result of the Westernisation process.”²⁵ Erdogan’s rallies included chants that he was a “mujahid,” or one who engages in jihad.²⁶

A pattern emerged by which each Islamist party did well enough electorally—at the expense of an increasingly weak left and a right that was viewed as corrupt—to inspire fear among Kemalists that it posed a threat to the republic.²⁷ Consequently, each party was eventually banned by the army or Turkey’s Constitutional Court. Thus, the National Order Party (MNP), which existed from 1970 to 1971, was succeeded by the National Salvation Party (MSP, 1972–80), which was followed by the Welfare Party (RP, 1983–98), and then by the Virtue Party (FP, 1997–2001).²⁸ Even in 1996, when the RP came in first in the parliamentary elections and Erdogan was appointed prime minister of a coalition government, his agenda was denounced by media outlets as “the Iranisation of Turkey.”²⁹ He was forced to resign by the military in 1997 and banned from politics for life.³⁰

What Islamists learned from these multiple rounds of repression by Turkey’s deep state was that so long as they were perceived as opposed to secularism and to Westernization, they would never be allowed to wield power. Only an Islamist party that claimed to support the Turkish republic and that purportedly wanted Turkey to be part of the West would be allowed to survive. In short, to win in Turkish politics, Islamists had to stop defining themselves as Islamists. Enter the AKP.

²⁴ Svante E. Cornell, “The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey,” Hudson Institute, September 3, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>.

²⁵ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 110.

²⁶ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 111.

²⁷ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 31,

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

²⁸ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 110; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 41–45,

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf; Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

²⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 112; Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

³⁰ Svante E. Cornell, “The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey,” Hudson Institute, September 3, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>; Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

Founding of the AKP

The AKP emerged from a split in Turkey’s Islamist movement following the banning of the Virtue Party (FP) by Turkey’s Constitutional Court in 2001. Necmettin Erbakan and other old-guard Islamists formed the Felicity Party (SP), which subscribed to the NOM’s longstanding anti-republic, anti-Western, anti-globalization philosophy.³¹ However, pragmatist elements within the FP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül, founded the AKP.³²

Erdoğan, Gül, and company sought to gain widespread, mainstream popular support for the AKP by jettisoning NOM policies and labels that had scared off secularists.³³ The NOM believed in a clash of civilizations, opposing the West and seeking to create closer ties with the Muslim world; the AKP supported European Union (EU) membership for Turkey, which was popular with most voters.³⁴ The NOM called for populist economic policies; the AKP backed neoliberal economics.³⁵ Most importantly, while the NOM embraced political Islam, the AKP explicitly rejected the Islamic label. Instead, they called their ideology “conservative democracy,” and indicated the AKP were “Muslim democrats” in the same way that many European parties were Christian Democrats.³⁶ Religion, in other words, was not blatantly central to the AKP’s public brand.

³¹ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 45–46, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

³² Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 45–46, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 117.

³³ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

³⁴ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 46, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

³⁵ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 45–46, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf; Burhanettin Duran, “The Justice and Development Party’s ‘New Politics,’” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 82.

³⁶ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 3, 47, 54, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf; Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 117; “AKP Explains Charter Changes, Slams Foreign Descriptions,” *Hürriyet* (Istanbul), March 28, 2010, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140731012047/http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=akp->

This reformist, nonsectarian, nonconfrontational, democratizing message proved popular with many voters, including conservatives, liberals, democrats, and traditional Muslims.³⁷ The Kemalists were burdened by a devastated economy, public perceptions that they were corrupt, and a backlash against the military’s repeated coups.³⁸ Consequently, the AKP prevailed in the 2002 parliamentary elections. While the party only received 34 percent of the popular vote, it won almost two-thirds of the seats because Turkish law required parties to receive at least 10 percent of the total vote to earn parliamentary representation, and only one other party crossed that threshold (a Kemalist party that earned only 19 percent).³⁹ Erbakan’s Felicity Party won only 2.5 percent of the vote and no parliamentary seats.⁴⁰

The AKP’s orientation towards the West and democracy gained it support not only domestically but abroad. The AKP considered Western support crucial in order to weaken the party’s most powerful enemies, Turkey’s military and judiciary.⁴¹ Particularly after the September 11, 2001, attacks, the U.S. was hungry for moderate Muslim allies in the fight against radical Islamic groups.⁴² The AKP recognized that desire.

In January 2002, Erdoğan visited the United States and met with former U.S. ambassador to Turkey Morton Abramowitz and with Graham Fuller, a Middle East expert at the CIA and one of the minds behind the RAND Corporation’s “moderate Islam” initiative.⁴³ Speaking at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, Erdoğan called America “Turkey’s natural partner.”⁴⁴ Turkish journalist Derya Sazak reported on Erdoğan’s maneuvering in this regard, writing, “Making references to the ‘moderate Islam’ of his electorate, Erdoğan has declared that

[explains-charter-changes-slams-foreign-descriptions-2010-03-28](#); Kenan Çayır, “The Emergence of Turkey’s Contemporary ‘Muslim Democrats,’” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 62.

³⁷ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>;

³⁸ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 48, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

³⁹ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 47–48, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

⁴⁰ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 117.

⁴¹ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 47, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

⁴² Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

⁴³ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

⁴⁴ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

the political model found in Turkey, based on the principle of ‘coming to power and departing from power through elections’ within a democratic, secular state order, can set an example for every country in the Muslim world.”⁴⁵ Senior American policymakers believed they had found their moderate Muslim model in the AKP.⁴⁶ U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said in 2004 that post-Saddam Iraq would “be an Islamic republic, as there are other Islamic republics— Turkey and Pakistan.”⁴⁷

It bears noting that the AKP’s adoption of a pro-Western, pro-democracy stance was a tactical move. Erdoğan himself stated in 1993, when Istanbul chair of the Welfare Party, that “democracy can’t be an objective but only an instrument... democracy is like a tram. You ride it until you arrive at your destination, then you step off.”⁴⁸ While Erdoğan served as mayor of Istanbul in 1996, he called himself “a servant of shari’a [Islamic law]” and the “imam of Istanbul.”⁴⁹ In 1997, while mayor of Istanbul, he earned himself a short prison term and lifetime ban from public office (later rescinded by the AKP government) by reciting a controversial Turkish poem: “The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets, and the faithful our soldiers.”⁵⁰ In January 2002, he said, “I have never used the expression, ‘I have changed.’ If saying that one has changed means a renunciation of one’s values, then using such an expression is impossible. We have merely shed our old skin in response to worldwide developments.”⁵¹ Erdoğan’s adoption of increasingly authoritarian tactics in the future demonstrates that his embrace of the title of conservative democrat was disingenuous.

The AKP’s Early Years in Power

The AKP, in their first several years in government, mostly kept its promise to govern as non-Islamist, problem-solving democrats. (Gül became prime minister after the AKP won the 2002

⁴⁵ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

⁴⁶ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

⁴⁷ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>; “Interview with Maybritt Illner of ZDF German Television,” U.S. Department of State, April 1, 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/31016.htm>.

⁴⁸ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 8, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 55, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

⁵⁰ Walter Mayr, “Who Can Challenge Erdogan?,” Spiegel, July 16, 2007, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/turkey-s-powerful-prime-minister-who-can-challenge-erdogan-a-495683.html>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 115.

⁵¹ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

elections, as Erdoğan was still barred from holding public office for life. However, the AKP-controlled parliament amended the Turkish constitution the following year so that Erdoğan could assume the position of prime minister.⁵²⁾

The backdrop to the AKP's agenda during this period was their pledge to do what it took to stabilize the economy and satisfy the EU's requirements for the beginning of negotiations on Turkey's entrance into the Union.⁵³ These requirements, the "Copenhagen criteria," determine the ability of any state to join the EU.⁵⁴ The Copenhagen criteria are:

[S]tability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU;
the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law... and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.⁵⁵

To improve the economy, the AKP government undertook reforms requested by the International Monetary Fund.⁵⁶ Turkey and the AKP subsequently benefitted from strong, prolonged national economic growth. (The economy grew by an average of 7.5 percent annually from 2002 to 2011).⁵⁷

To meet the Copenhagen criteria, the AKP made extensive reforms to Turkey's judicial system, to its human rights laws, and to the role of the military.⁵⁸

In 2002, before the AKP's victory in that year's elections, the Turkish parliament voted to abolish capital punishment in peacetime.⁵⁹ In 2004, the AKP-controlled parliament enacted a ban

⁵² Malcolm Edward Yapp, "Rise of the AKP in the 21st century," Britannica, accessed March 11, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Turkey/Rise-of-the-AKP-in-the-21st-century>.

⁵³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 117; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 51,

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

⁵⁴ "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria)," EUR-Lex, accessed March 11, 2023,

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>.

⁵⁵ "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria)," EUR-Lex, accessed March 11, 2023,

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>.

⁵⁶ Burhanettin Duran, "The Justice and Development Party's 'New Politics,'" in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 80.

⁵⁷ Morton Abramowitz and Henri J. Barkey, "Turkey's Transformers," *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2009,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2009-11-01/turkeys-transformers>; Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey: The New Model?," Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁵⁸ Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey: The New Model?," Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁵⁹ "Turkey Agrees Death Penalty Ban," BBC News, January 9, 2004,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3384667.stm>.

on executions during war, as well.⁶⁰ That said, the move was not a dramatic step, as a moratorium on the use of the death penalty had been in effect since 1984.⁶¹ The State Security Courts were also dismantled.⁶²

As part of its reforms to the Turkish penal code, the AKP government instituted life imprisonment for honor killings.⁶³ The AKP took other pro-women measures, such as an education ministry campaign to improve girls' literacy and ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.⁶⁴ However, the government also tried to use its penal code changes to criminalize adultery, but withdrew that change in the face of a domestic and European backlash.⁶⁵

The government took several steps to increase human rights protections for minorities. These moves were not unprecedented. In 2002, the previous government had lifted a prohibition on the use of the Kurdish language in education and broadcasting.⁶⁶ The AKP implemented this change, launching state broadcasting in languages including Arabic, Bosnian, Circassian, and Kurdish in 2003.⁶⁷ The government also promulgated legislation to liberalize regulations regarding foundations run by minorities and enable the return of state-confiscated minority properties.⁶⁸ The government also established that international treaties regarding human rights superseded Turkish domestic legislation.⁶⁹

The AKP platform said that while Turkish should remain the official language of the state and the education system, it viewed “the cultural activities in languages other than Turkish, including broadcasting, as an asset which reinforces and supports the unity and integrity of our country, rather than weakens it.”⁷⁰ Erdoğan emphasized that Turkish citizenship should trump differences

⁶⁰ “Turkey Agrees Death Penalty Ban,” BBC News, January 9, 2004,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3384667.stm>.

⁶¹ “Turkey Agrees Death Penalty Ban,” BBC News, January 9, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3384667.stm>

⁶² Burhanettin Duran, “The Justice and Development Party’s ‘New Politics,’” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 87.

⁶³ Ahmet Yıldız, “Problematizing the Intellectual and Political Vestiges” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 52.

⁶⁴ Ahmet Yıldız, “Problematizing the Intellectual and Political Vestiges” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 52.

⁶⁵ Ahmet Yıldız, “Problematizing the Intellectual and Political Vestiges” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 53; Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 54–55.

⁶⁶ “Turkey Passes Key Reform Package,” BBC News, August 3, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2168563.stm>.

⁶⁷ Zihni Erdem, “Kürtçe yayında sınırlar kalkıyor,” *Radikal* (Istanbul), June 11, 2006, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120404031042/http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=189892>.

⁶⁸ Zihni Erdem, “Kürtçe yayında sınırlar kalkıyor,” *Radikal* (Istanbul), June 11, 2006, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120404031042/http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=189892>;

Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 66, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

⁶⁹ Burhanettin Duran, “The Justice and Development Party’s ‘New Politics,’” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 87.

⁷⁰ Burhanettin Duran, “The Justice and Development Party’s ‘New Politics,’” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 97.

in religion or ethnicity. “We are a mosaic which is composed of different elements,” he said. “No matter which ethnicity nor religion any citizen of this country belongs to, we should all unite to live as brothers under the “supra-national identity of citizenship of Turkey.”⁷¹

The third pillar of the necessary reforms to begin the EU accession process for Turkey was the reduction of the military’s role in politics, which coincided with the AKP’s interests in weakening rivals to its power. The government moved to elect a civilian chief of the National Security Council and scrap military spots on the Radio and Television High Council and the Council of Higher Education.⁷²

Perhaps the most controversial part of the AKP’s agenda involved expanding educational opportunities for traditional Muslims. In 2005, the education ministry allowed graduates of Islamic Imam-Hatip schools to more easily be admitted to programs in non-religious subjects in university, instead of having to being limited to a concentration in a field of Islamic studies or having to fulfill additional tasks not required for high school graduates in secular schools.⁷³ The AKP also pushed to liberalize laws on dress code for university students so that women who wear headscarves could attend, but met resistance from the Constitutional Court, which ruled that wearing a headscarf violates articles 3 and 14 of the constitution.⁷⁴ The European Court of Human Rights then ruled in 2005 that preventing a woman from attending university because she wore a headscarf did not violate her human rights.⁷⁵ Erdoğan provoked secularist backlash when he protested the decision by saying, “I don’t understand the way they view the headscarf. A court can’t make decisions on such matters, the *ulema* [Islamic scholars] should.”⁷⁶

Nonetheless, in most respects the AKP kept its promise to govern democratically and with moderation during their first term in government. In their second term and beyond, however, as this report will describe, the party has moved to consolidate its rule and undermine not only the military but other institutions that checked the AKP’s ambitions.

The Beginnings of the AKP’s Authoritarian Turn

In 2007, the AKP ran Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as its candidate for president of Turkey, an office then selected by the parliament. However, Gül drew fierce opposition from Kemalists because of their perception that he was a clear Islamist, as symbolized for them by the fact that his wife wore a headscarf.

⁷¹ Burhanettin Duran, “The Justice and Development Party’s ‘New Politics,’” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 98.

⁷² Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁷³ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 63–64, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

⁷⁴ Burhanettin Duran, “The Justice and Development Party’s ‘New Politics,’” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 93.

⁷⁵ Burhanettin Duran, “The Justice and Development Party’s ‘New Politics,’” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 93.

⁷⁶ Burhanettin Duran, “The Justice and Development Party’s ‘New Politics,’” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (London: Routledge, 2007), 93.

Opponents of Gül’s candidacy tried to stop it on two fronts. First, secularist MPs boycotted the parliamentary vote for president, leaving that body without the two-thirds quorum required for election.⁷⁷ Second, the military leadership, in what was nicknamed an attempted “e-coup,” posted a message on its website stating that “if necessary, the Turkish Armed Forces will not hesitate to make their position and stance abundantly clear as the absolute defenders of secularism.”⁷⁸

However, the military’s statement backfired, uniting liberals and democrats behind the AKP, which was then seen as a defender of Turkish democracy.⁷⁹ The confident AKP government responded by seeking a renewed popular mandate through early elections, which it won with about 47 percent of the vote—13 points more than it received in 2002.⁸⁰ The new parliament then elected Gül president, and the military did not follow through on its implied threat.⁸¹

Emboldened, the AKP swiftly launched the first of multiple purges of its enemies. Prosecutors initiated the so-called “Ergenekon” and “Sledgehammer” investigations, which alleged that hundreds of military officers, opposition politicians, and journalists had plotted to bring about a Kemalist coup.⁸² The investigations and subsequent trials had the effect of ridding the AKP of numerous rivals. Ihsan Yilmaz writes:

[The trials] were naively seen by many domestic and international democratic individuals, myself included, as well as observers, experts, and institutions such as the EU, as a chance to get rid of Turkey’s notorious deep-state our, to put it more directly, the Kemalist tutelage led by the military. Unfortunately, it turned into an undemocratic power struggle within the state...⁸³

In 2008, Kemalists took one more shot at stopping the AKP. Turkey’s chief prosecutor sought the party’s closure in court, claiming the AKP had tried to undermine the secular republic in

⁷⁷ “Factbox—Turkey’s Messy Presidential Election,” Reuters, May 6, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-president/factbox-turkeys-messy-presidential-election-idUSL0668851920070506>.

⁷⁸ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁷⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 118

⁸⁰ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁸¹ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁸² Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 119

⁸³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 119

furtherance of an Islamist program.⁸⁴ The closure petition fell one vote short of success in the Constitutional Court, however.⁸⁵

In 2010, the AKP further tightened its hold on power through a successful constitutional referendum. The referendum was held to decide on reforms considered necessary to bring Turkish institutions in line with the EU.⁸⁶ The changes on the ballot, which were supported by the European Commission and opposed solely by the Kemalists, had the effect of ending Kemalist power over the judiciary and reducing the military's role in politics.⁸⁷ The number of seats on the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors that are appointed by the president and parliament was increased, for example.⁸⁸ Some changes were less controversial, such as expanding labor rights and increasing protections against discrimination on the basis of age or disability.⁸⁹ 58 percent of voters supported the constitutional amendments.⁹⁰

The AKP followed up its triumph in the 2010 referendum by winning a third consecutive mandate in the 2011 parliamentary elections, gaining just short of 50 percent of the vote.⁹¹ During the campaign, Erdoğan set forth more divisive, nationalistic rhetoric, driving away Kurdish voters.⁹² And after the election, the government began to rule more autocratically, in what Ihsan Yilmaz describes as “AKP 2.0.”:

[T]he AKP's reformist and democratizing agenda became steadily weakened. Erdoğan was re-elected as prime minister, but thereafter he began to react to political challenges in an increasingly demagogic and autocratic manner. AKP version 2.0 is an example of what happens when domestic and external social, political and economic forces and

⁸⁴ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁸⁵ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>;

Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

⁸⁶ “Turkish Reform Vote Gets Western Backing,” BBC News, September 13, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11279881>.

⁸⁷ “Turkish Reform Vote Gets Western Backing,” BBC News, September 13, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11279881>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 118.

⁸⁸ Ceren Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey: From the Birth of the Republic to the AKP* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 259.

⁸⁹ “Turkish Reform Vote Gets Western Backing,” BBC News, September 13, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11279881>.

⁹⁰ “Turkish Reform Vote Gets Western Backing,” BBC News, September 13, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11279881>.

⁹¹ Constanze Letsch, “Recep Erdogan Wins by Landslide in Turkey’s General Election,” *Guardian* (London), June 13, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/13/recep-erdogan-turkey-general-election>.

⁹² Constanze Letsch, “Recep Erdogan Wins by Landslide in Turkey’s General Election,” *Guardian* (London), June 13, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/13/recep-erdogan-turkey-general-election>.

constraints disappear. The requirement to be a Muslim Democrat was no longer called for so strongly and some former Islamist leaders returned to their original ideology.⁹³

In 2011, the government again took on the military and won. The military’s chief of staff resigned amidst a clash with Erdoğan about staff promotions.⁹⁴ The very same day, the army, navy, and air force chiefs requested early retirement.⁹⁵ By early 2012, 50 percent of Turkish admirals and 10 percent of generals were in jail for conspiring against the government.⁹⁶

During this period, the AKP, in a move reminiscent of its Islamist predecessor parties, embraced populism and explicitly Islam-based political appeals. Erdoğan re-adopted an identity he had previously worn, in the 1990s, as a member of the so-called “Black Turks”—conservative Muslims.⁹⁷ The Black Turks were portrayed by Erdoğan and his fellow Islamists as the “pure” people, as opposed to the “White Turks”—Kemalists, portrayed by Islamists as enemies of the Black Turks.⁹⁸ Instead of behaving like problem-solving, big-tent conservative democrats, the AKP now was “otherizing” the political opposition, leaving voters a stark choice between good and evil.⁹⁹

In this context, the AKP finally accomplished its goal of ending the ban on wearing headscarves in universities, enacting legislation to that effect in 2011.¹⁰⁰ (Previously, in 2008, the AKP-appointed head of the Higher Education Council then ordered universities to begin admitting female students who wore headscarves, but less than 10 percent of universities complied.)¹⁰¹ The AKP also tried to limit alcohol consumption, heavily taxing and otherwise restricting the sale of

⁹³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 119–20.

⁹⁴ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁹⁵ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁹⁶ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

⁹⁷ Walter Mayr, “Who Can Challenge Erdogan? Part 2: The Smug ‘White Turks,’” Spiegel, July 16, 2007, archived in the Internet Archive,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20171006231857/http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/turkey-s-powerful-prime-minister-who-can-challenge-erdogan-a-495683-2.html>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 12, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

⁹⁸ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 12, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

⁹⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 12, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

¹⁰¹ Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 62–63,

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.

alcoholic beverages.¹⁰² Stores carrying alcohol had to be located at least 100 meters away from schools and places of worship, and could no longer sell alcohol between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.¹⁰³ Further, Turkish Airlines no longer served alcohol on domestic flights.¹⁰⁴ Thus, after years of building up power through eschewing the Islamist brand, Erdoğan and company now were strong enough to carry out an Islamist agenda that they seemingly had never abandoned at heart.

It should be noted that by this point, Erdoğan had also reoriented Turkey’s foreign policy partly away from the West. Facing EU hesitance to allow Turkey membership, the AKP government developed closer ties with Russia, Middle Eastern Muslim states, and Central Asia.¹⁰⁵ Turkey also formed a relationship with the de facto Hamas government in the Gaza Strip.¹⁰⁶ Erdoğan condemned Israel at the World Economic Forum in 2009, soon after the conclusion of Israel’s military operation Cast Lead in Gaza.¹⁰⁷ Erdoğan also hosted Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir, accused of war crimes, multiple times in Turkey since 2008.¹⁰⁸ Further, Erdoğan congratulated Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his controversial, disputed reelection in 2009, which had brought Iranians to the streets in mass protests against the regime.¹⁰⁹ And after the Arab Spring in 2011, Erdoğan supported political parties affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia.¹¹⁰

The Gezi Protests and Subsequent Repression

In 2013, Turks went to the streets in what became known as the Gezi Protests. The demonstrators objected to a government scheme to construct a mosque and shopping mall in the location of the

¹⁰² Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 12, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹⁰³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 12, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 12, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

¹⁰⁶ Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey: The New Model?,” Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, archived in the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113182236/https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-the-new-model/>.

¹⁰⁷ Katrin Bennhold, “Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html>

¹⁰⁸ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

¹⁰⁹ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

¹¹⁰ Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War–era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power>.

public Gezi Park.¹¹¹ The scheme reflected the Erdoğan regime’s general problem of clientelism—building a social order in which private persons and entities supportive of the state were rewarded with public goods.¹¹² As Yilmaz notes, “A vast majority of ‘welfare’ projects were centered around privatizing public sectors, and this led to the rise of a new bourgeoisie who profited from, the neo-liberal reforms. They were naturally loyal to Erdoğan’s patronage.”¹¹³ Protesters had had enough of the selling off of public property to benefit a select few.

While the protests were peaceful, the government’s response was anything but.¹¹⁴ The police killed 11 people, and Erdoğan demonized and otherized the protesters and the supporters thereof, accusing them of engaging in “terrorism propaganda” and “insulting” the government.¹¹⁵ The regime falsely accused protesters of drinking alcohol inside a nearby mosque, going into the mosque while wearing shoes (forbidden in Islam), and assaulting a headscarf-clad woman carrying a baby.¹¹⁶

Additionally, in a sign of things to come, Erdoğan castigated those journalists who backed the protesters and criticized the government. “There is no difference between a terrorist holding a gun or a bomb and those who use their pen and position to serve their aims,” he said.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Constanze Letsch, “Turkey protests spread after violence in Istanbul over park demolition,” *Guardian* (London), June 1, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/31/istanbul-protesters-violent-clashes-police>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹¹² Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹¹³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ Constanze Letsch, “Turkey protests spread after violence in Istanbul over park demolition,” *Guardian* (London), June 1, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/31/istanbul-protesters-violent-clashes-police>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹¹⁵ Kursat Akyol, “No Justice for Gezi Victims,” *Deutsche Welle*, May 30, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/three-years-on-in-turkey-no-justice-for-victims-of-gezi-park-protests/a-19294078>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹¹⁶ “Turkey’s Main Opposition CHP Seeks Probe into ‘Alcohol in Mosque’ Gezi Protest Claim,” *Hürriyet* (Istanbul), December 9, 2013, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-main-opposition-chp-seeks-probe-into-alcohol-in-mosque-gezi-protest-claim-59301>; “Turkey Sentences 244 Protesters to Jail in Gezi Park Trial,” *Agence France-Presse*, October 23, 2015, <https://theworld.org/stories/2015-10-23/turkey-sentences-244-protesters-jail-gezi-park-trial>; “Released Footage Shows No Physical Attack on Headscarf-wearing Woman during Gezi Protests,” *Hürriyet* (Istanbul), February 15, 2014, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/released-footage-shows-no-physical-attack-on-headscarf-wearing-woman-during-gezi-protests-62479>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 121.

¹¹⁷ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

Soon after, in December 2013, Erdoğan launched another purge of his enemies. That month, police investigations revealed widespread corruption among senior AKP figures, including three cabinet ministers and Erdoğan’s son, Bilal.¹¹⁸ The government responded by labeling the investigations a “judicial coup” undertaken by members of the Gülen Movement (GM), an Islamist group that had long been allied with the AKP.¹¹⁹ The investigation was dismantled, with the police officers involved in it arrested, the prosecutors reassigned, and the cases shut.¹²⁰

The government then proceeded to crack down on the GM, appropriating the movement’s businesses and property, as well as seizing GM media outlets and making them pro-AKP in orientation.¹²¹ Erdoğan claimed that GM members were wiretapping him and other senior Turkish government figures, thereby justifying mass arrests of GM-affiliated judges, civil servants, and police officers.¹²² Erdoğan alleged that the movement was constructing a “parallel structure” within the Turkish state and promised that he would “go into their lairs” and dismantle this network.¹²³ Thus, as with the military and judiciary before it, the AKP had painted the GM as the enemy and the AKP as the protector of Turkey against it.

Simultaneously, companies allied with the regime took over most other press outlets, including television stations and newspapers, leaving little media outside governmental control.¹²⁴ The government temporarily blocked Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and multiple other websites.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ “Turkey’s Erdogan and the Illicit Recordings,” BBC News, February 25, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26345683>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹¹⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹²⁰ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹²¹ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 13–14, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹²² Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 14, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹²³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 14, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>; W. Robert Pearson, “What Caused the Turkish Coup Attempt,” *Politico*, July 16, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/what-caused-the-turkish-coup-attempt-214057/>; “Turkey’s Erdogan and the Illicit Recordings,” BBC News, February 25, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26345683>;

¹²⁴ W. Robert Pearson, “What Caused the Turkish Coup Attempt,” *Politico*, July 16, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/what-caused-the-turkish-coup-attempt-214057/>; “Turkey: Events of 2018,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey>

¹²⁵ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, “Turkey’s Diyanet under AKP Rule: From Protector to Imposer of State Ideology?,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 631.

In 2015, Erdoğan turned his ire on the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), a pro-Kurdish group. When the HDP criticized Erdoğan’s intent to replace Turkey’s parliamentary system with a strong presidential system lacking checks on executive authority, the government arrested hundreds of HDP members on purported charges of ties to terrorist organizations. Then, in January 2016, after hundreds of scholars put their names on a petition calling on the government to end military operations in majority-Kurdish provinces in southeast Turkey, the government compelled universities to fire most of those academics.¹²⁶

Term-limited as prime minister, Erdoğan was elected president in 2015. While the presidency was then weaker than the office of prime minister, the AKP had long sought to change the constitution to make the president a strong executive, and would do so soon enough, leaving Erdoğan in place and ready to take advantage.

The 2016 Coup Attempt and the Subsequent Purges

In July 2016, a small faction of the Turkish military attempted to overthrow the government but failed miserably. Erdoğan called the coup attempt “a blessing in disguise” and “a gift from God,” using it to declare a state of emergency.¹²⁷ Pursuant to the state of emergency, the government carried out massive further purges—particularly of the GM, which he blamed for the coup.¹²⁸ The government dismissed over 150,000 service members, police, civil servants, and academics from their jobs and arrested additional thousands.¹²⁹ Foundations were shuttered, including not only GM ones but the Association of Judges and Prosecutors, a secular group critical of an AKP-

¹²⁶ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 122.

¹²⁷ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 14, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 122; Gareth Jones and Ercan Gurses, “Turkey’s Erdogan Shuts Schools, Charities in First State of Emergency Decree,” Reuters, July 23, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-emergency/turkeys-erdogan-shuts-schools-charities-in-first-state-of-emergency-decree-idUSKCN1030BC>.

¹²⁸ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 14, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 122; Peter Kenyon, “Turkey’s State of Emergency Ends, While Erdogan’s Power Grows and ‘Purge’ Continues,” National Public Radio, July 26, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/26/632307755/turkeys-state-of-emergency-ends-while-erdogans-power-grows-and-purge-continues>.

¹²⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 14, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>; Peter Kenyon, “Turkey’s State of Emergency Ends, While Erdogan’s Power Grows and ‘Purge’ Continues,” National Public Radio, July 26, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/26/632307755/turkeys-state-of-emergency-ends-while-erdogans-power-grows-and-purge-continues>.

backed law regarding the judiciary.¹³⁰ Human rights lawyers were also arrested en masse.¹³¹ And detainees claimed that they were tortured or otherwise ill-treated while in custody.¹³²

Further, the regime increased persecution of what remained of independent Turkish media. During the state of emergency, the authorities shuttered over 170 media outlets and prosecuted journalists—including more than a dozen at the secular nationalist daily *Cumhuriyet*—on terrorism charges.¹³³ Turkey has become one of the world’s worst jailers of journalists, with 40 journalists in custody as of December 1, 2022.¹³⁴ The government also has cracked down on use of social media, prosecuting thousands each year on concocted terrorism, defamation, incitement, or other charges by using social media posts as evidence.¹³⁵ In October 2022, the government introduced legal amendments that would impose a sentence of one to three years’ imprisonment for “disseminating false information.”¹³⁶

In 2018, *Cumhuriyet*’s then-head, Akin Atalay, said state repression had reached new heights. “It’s the most anti-democratic I’ve seen it,” said. “Critics are thrown in jail. All dissent is under oppression all the time. There are thoughts they allow you to think, and other thoughts you are not allowed to think. And if you dare to think it and voice it, you’re going to be punished.”¹³⁷

The government also used its powers to remove local governments controlled by the opposition. In Turkey’s majority-Kurd southeast, for example, the regime took over dozens of municipalities that in 2014 had lawfully elected governments led by the Democratic Regions Party, a sister party of the opposition HDP, and jailed numerous mayors on terrorism-related charges.¹³⁸

¹³⁰ Gareth Jones and Ercan Gurses, “Turkey’s Erdogan Shuts Schools, Charities in First State of Emergency Decree,” Reuters, July 23, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-emergency/turkeys-erdogan-shuts-schools-charities-in-first-state-of-emergency-decree-idUSKCN1030BC>.

¹³¹ “Turkey: Events of 2018,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/turkey>.

¹³² “Turkey: Events of 2018,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/turkey>; “Turkey: Events of 2019,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/turkey>.

¹³³ Peter Kenyon, “Turkey’s State of Emergency Ends, While Erdogan’s Power Grows and ‘Purge’ Continues,” National Public Radio, July 26, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/26/632307755/turkeys-state-of-emergency-ends-while-erdogans-power-grows-and-purge-continues>.

¹³⁴ “40 Journalists Imprisoned in Turkey as of December 1, 2022,” Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed March 27, 2023, https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2022/?status=Imprisoned&cc_fips%5B%5D=TU&start_year=2022&end_year=2022&group_by=location.

¹³⁵ “Turkey: Events of 2022,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/turkey>.

¹³⁶ “Turkey: Events of 2022,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/turkey>.

¹³⁷ Peter Kenyon, “Turkey’s Crackdown on Suspected Opponents Continues 2 Years after Attempted Coup,” National Public Radio, July 21, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/21/630589442/turkeys-crackdown-on-suspected-opponents-continues-2-years-after-attempted-coup>.

¹³⁸ “Turkey: Events of 2020,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey>.

While then-Prime Minister Binali Yildirim of the AKP said in 2016 the government intended for the state of emergency to last only three months, it continued for two years, ending in July 2018.¹³⁹ In 2017, in the midst of the state of emergency, Turkey went through another constitutional referendum, this time one that approved the AKP’s long-desired change to create a strong presidency and abolish the office of prime minister.¹⁴⁰ The month before the state of emergency was lifted, Erdoğan was reelected, locking in AKP rule for another five years.¹⁴¹

Parliament also voted to make some of the emergency measures permanent—including restrictions on movement, prohibitions on public assembly, and expanded police powers to detain suspects without charge—and extend the president’s power to dismiss judges and other public servants at his discretion for three years.¹⁴² Indeed, according to one of Erdoğan’s former deputies, the government had only lifted the state of emergency in order to improve the economy by assuaging worried global markets.¹⁴³

Regressive Measures against Vulnerable Communities

In addition to the government’s repeated purges of civil servants, the judiciary, military, the police, academia, the media, and civil society, AKP rule has seen regression on human rights on other fronts. For example, for years, several provincial governors have banned lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) groups from holding public events, including pride marches,

¹³⁹ Gareth Jones and Ercan Gurses, “Turkey’s Erdogan Shuts Schools, Charities in First State of Emergency Decree,” Reuters, July 23, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-emergency/turkeys-erdogan-shuts-schools-charities-in-first-state-of-emergency-decree-idUSKCN1030BC>; Holly Ellyatt, “Turkey Lifts State of Emergency but Nothing Much Has Changed, Analysts Warn,” CNBC, July 19, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/19/turkey-lifts-state-of-emergency-but-nothing-much-has-changed-analysts.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Kenyon, “Turkey’s State of Emergency Ends, While Erdogan’s Power Grows and ‘Purge’ Continues,” National Public Radio, July 26, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/26/632307755/turkeys-state-of-emergency-ends-while-erdogans-power-grows-and-purge-continues>; “Turkey: Normalizing the State of Emergency,” Human Rights Watch, July 20, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/20/turkey-normalizing-state-emergency>.

¹⁴¹ Peter Kenyon, “Turkey’s State of Emergency Ends, While Erdogan’s Power Grows and ‘Purge’ Continues,” National Public Radio, July 26, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/26/632307755/turkeys-state-of-emergency-ends-while-erdogans-power-grows-and-purge-continues>.

¹⁴² Peter Kenyon, “Turkey’s State of Emergency Ends, While Erdogan’s Power Grows and ‘Purge’ Continues,” National Public Radio, July 26, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/26/632307755/turkeys-state-of-emergency-ends-while-erdogans-power-grows-and-purge-continues>; “Turkey: Normalizing the State of Emergency,” Human Rights Watch, July 20, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/20/turkey-normalizing-state-emergency>; “Two Years after Failed Coup, Turkey Ends State of Emergency,” France 24, July 19, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180719-two-years-after-failed-coup-turkey-ends-state-emergency-erdogan-purges>.

¹⁴³ Peter Kenyon, “Turkey’s State of Emergency Ends, While Erdogan’s Power Grows and ‘Purge’ Continues,” National Public Radio, July 26, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/26/632307755/turkeys-state-of-emergency-ends-while-erdogans-power-grows-and-purge-continues>.

which have been banned in Istanbul for eight straight years.¹⁴⁴ Senior office holders have harshly criticized LGBT people in speeches and supported discrimination against them.¹⁴⁵

The regime has also used homophobia as a pretense to undercut women’s rights. In 2021, by presidential decree, Turkey withdrew from the Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.¹⁴⁶ Erdogan’s head of communications justified the decision by pointing to the convention’s prohibition of discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation, claiming the convention was “hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality—which is incompatible with Turkey’s social and family values.”¹⁴⁷

Erdogan has also resorted to antisemitic propaganda. In 2021, he used language reminiscent of blood libels when he accused Jews and/or Israel (using the words interchangeably) of committing “terrorism” against Palestinians. “It is in their nature,” he said. “They are murderers, to the point that they kill children who are five or six years old. They are murderers, to the point they drag women on the ground to their death and they are murderers, to the point they kill old people... They only are satisfied by sucking their blood.”¹⁴⁸

Islamist Infrastructure, Governance, and Rhetoric

The AKP government has used the Diyanet to advance its Islamist agenda and give an Islamic seal of approval to its authoritarian policies and actions. Under AKP rule, the budget and personnel of Diyanet has dramatically increased, to the point where, 2015, its budget exceeded that of eight major cabinet ministries combined.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ “Turkey: Events of 2018,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/turkey>; “Turkey: Events of 2019,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/turkey>; “Turkey: Events of 2022,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/turkey>.

¹⁴⁵ “Turkey: Events of 2021,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/turkey>.

¹⁴⁶ “Turkey: Erdoğan’s Onslaught on Rights and Democracy,” Human Rights Watch, March 24, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/24/turkey-erdogans-onslaught-rights-and-democracy>.

¹⁴⁷ “Turkey: Erdoğan’s Onslaught on Rights and Democracy,” Human Rights Watch, March 24, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/24/turkey-erdogans-onslaught-rights-and-democracy>.

¹⁴⁸ “US Condemns Erdogan ‘anti-Semitic’ Remarks,” France 24, May 19, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210518-us-condemns-erdogan-anti-semitic-remarks>; Cnaan Liphshiz, “Turkish Jews Defend Erdogan against Antisemitism Charge by US,” *Times of Israel*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkish-jews-defend-erdogan-against-antisemitism-charge-by-us/>.

¹⁴⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz, “AKP, Islam, and Diyanet,” (unpublished working paper, October 26, 2021), 4–5, <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=32502611808909211909608806409308701003405005801207008211208311407110601408509108009903803512712402012100200407402007810511812510506006901005212700408909910000101906409303907808402700202902606802500602807902308408209209308601811810411411901002081014094&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE>.

The Diyanet, echoing the Erdoğan regime’s rhetoric during its prosecution of military campaigns against Kurdish groups, has published cartoons and magazines glorifying martyrdom.¹⁵⁰ It has issued communications supporting Erdoğan’s rhetoric that abortion is murder.¹⁵¹ After Erdoğan’s son-in-law, the minister of energy, refused to shake the hand of the wife of an AKP MP, the Diyanet issued a fatwa forbidding men from shaking hands with women.¹⁵²

The Diyanet’s Erdoğan-appointed head from 2010 to 2017, Mehmet Görmez, also condemned the GM during the regime’s widespread persecution of the movement. He said in 2015:

[T]his movement [sic] desire for political power damages not only the state structure, but also Islam itself. In this regard, we as the Diyanet will never let this instigation enter into the mosques and in our nation. In this situation, one of the main aims of the Diyanet is to act together with our nation, our government and our state, and without any doubt it will play its part.¹⁵³

The Diyanet has also lent religious legitimacy to Erdoğan’s war on social media. At a Diyanet forum in 2016 on “Social Media and the Family in the Context of Privacy,” Görmez said, “Unfortunately, every kind of lies, imposture, defamation, humiliation and gossip is located in social media and thus they may damage all of humanity. In this regard we, as religious authorities, have to write a social media catechism, which will give the main principles of how to use social media.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Ihsan Yilmaz, “AKP, Islam, and Diyanet,” (unpublished working paper, October 26, 2021), 9, <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=325026118089092119096088064093087010034050058012070082112083114071106014085091080099038035127124020121002004074020078105118125105060069010052127004089099100001019064093039078084027002029026068025006028079023084082092093086018118104114119010022081014094&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE>.

¹⁵¹ Ihsan Yilmaz, “AKP, Islam, and Diyanet,” (unpublished working paper, October 26, 2021), 9, <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=325026118089092119096088064093087010034050058012070082112083114071106014085091080099038035127124020121002004074020078105118125105060069010052127004089099100001019064093039078084027002029026068025006028079023084082092093086018118104114119010022081014094&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE>; Nil Mutluer, “Diyanet’s Role in Building the ‘Yeni (New) Milli’ in the AKP Era,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 27 (2018), 14; Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, “Turkey’s Diyanet under AKP Rule: From Protector to Imposer of State Ideology?,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 629.

¹⁵² Ihsan Yilmaz, “AKP, Islam, and Diyanet,” (unpublished working paper, October 26, 2021), 10, <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=325026118089092119096088064093087010034050058012070082112083114071106014085091080099038035127124020121002004074020078105118125105060069010052127004089099100001019064093039078084027002029026068025006028079023084082092093086018118104114119010022081014094&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE>.

¹⁵³ Ihsan Yilmaz, “AKP, Islam, and Diyanet,” (unpublished working paper, October 26, 2021), 9–10, <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=325026118089092119096088064093087010034050058012070082112083114071106014085091080099038035127124020121002004074020078105118125105060069010052127004089099100001019064093039078084027002029026068025006028079023084082092093086018118104114119010022081014094&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE>.

¹⁵⁴ Ihsan Yilmaz, “AKP, Islam, and Diyanet,” (unpublished working paper, October 26, 2021), 11, <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=325026118089092119096088064093087010034050058012070082112083114071106014085091080099038035127124020121002004074020078105118125105060069010052127004089099100001019064093039078084027002029026068025006028079023084082092093086018118104114119010022081014094&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE>.

The Diyanet also used its power to help defeat the 2016 coup attempt. Erdoğan and Görmez reportedly ordered imams to issue public calls to prayer to mobilize the masses into the streets against the coup attempt.¹⁵⁵ The Diyanet denied Islamic burial to those suspected of involvement in the coup attempt.¹⁵⁶ The Diyanet released a fatwa supporting the government’s subsequent repressive measures.¹⁵⁷

Erdoğan and company have also Islamized the education system. The regime has made religious education mandatory in Turkish schools and changed the governance of educational institutions so as to make education less secular.¹⁵⁸

In 2020, in a divisive move, Erdoğan reopened the Hagia Sophia as an operating mosque.¹⁵⁹ The Hagia Sophia had been built as a cathedral before being turned into a mosque under the Ottomans and then into a museum under Atatürk.¹⁶⁰ For the purpose of reopening, Christian artwork in the Hagia Sophia was covered up by drapes. “Restoring Hagia Sophia as a mosque is a long-stated goal of the Islamists,” Turkey expert Soner Cagaptay of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy said. It is something [Erdoğan] has always believed in, and he wants to do it before he is gone.”¹⁶¹

Erdoğan laced his speech announcing the reopening with Islamist, anti-Western, and Turkish nationalist rhetoric:

The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the statement that we have new words to say to the world as the Turkish Nation, Muslims and all humanity. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is our remembrance of our breakthrough periods in our history, from Bedir to Manzikert, from the Battle of Nicopolis to Battle [*sic*] of Gallipoli. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the symbol of our determination to protect the trust of our martyrs and veterans, if necessary, at the expense of our lives. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is a salute to all the symbolic cities of our civilization, from Bukhara to Andalusia. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the requirement of our loyalty to our ancestors, from

[2081014094&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE](#); Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, “Turkey’s Diyanet under AKP Rule: From Protector to Imposer of State Ideology?,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 631.

¹⁵⁵ Pinar Tremblay, “How Erdogan Used the Power of the Mosques against Coup Attempt,” Al-Monitor, July 25, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/07/turkey-coup-attempt-erdogan-mosques.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Pinar Tremblay, “How Erdogan Used the Power of the Mosques against Coup Attempt,” Al-Monitor, July 25, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/07/turkey-coup-attempt-erdogan-mosques.html>.

¹⁵⁷ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 15, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹⁵⁸ W. Robert Pearson, “What Caused the Turkish Coup Attempt,” *Politico*, July 16, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/what-caused-the-turkish-coup-attempt-214057/>

¹⁵⁹ Carlotta Gall, “Erdogan Fulfills Cherished Goal, Opening Hagia Sophia to Prayers,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/world/europe/turkey-hagia-sophia-mosque-prayers.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Carlotta Gall, “Erdogan Fulfills Cherished Goal, Opening Hagia Sophia to Prayers,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/world/europe/turkey-hagia-sophia-mosque-prayers.html>.

¹⁶¹ Carlotta Gall, “Erdogan Fulfills Cherished Goal, Opening Hagia Sophia to Prayers,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/world/europe/turkey-hagia-sophia-mosque-prayers.html>.

Alparslan to Fatih and Abdul Hamid... The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the symbol of the re-rise of our sun of civilization that is based on the foundations of justice, conscience, morality, belief in the Oneness of God, and brotherhood that humanity has been longing for... This is the best answer to the rude attacks on our symbolic values all over the Muslim World... The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the harbinger of the liberation of Masjid al-Aqsa [the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem].¹⁶²

Ihsan Yilmaz notes that the speech “reaffirms [Erdoğan’s] belief that he is the latest in a chain of glorious and victorious military commanders from Prophet Muhammad to Alparslan to the great Ottoman Sultans and even Mustafa Kemal,” and the battles Erdoğan listed include those fought by Muslims against non-Muslims, and not intra-Muslim wars.¹⁶³ Notably, the official English translation of Erdoğan’s speech excludes his call to end Israel’s control of the area of the Old City of Jerusalem containing the al-Aqsa mosque.¹⁶⁴

On the day of the mosque’s reopening, the head of the Diyanet, Ali Erbaş, gave a sermon holding a sword in his hand. In the sermon, he, like Erdoğan, connected the reopening to the empowerment of a broader Muslim world that he portrayed as being under siege. Erbaş said:

The reopening of Hagia Sophia to worship means that all sorrowful mosques, first and foremost the Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, and oppressed believers on earth are able to get lifeline support... Due to the hostility to Islam to rises each passing day, there are mosques in various parts of the world today that are attacked, closed by force, and even bombed and destroyed. Hundreds of millions of Muslims are facing oppression. We need to maintain justice in geographies surrounded by oppression, injustice, tears, and despair.¹⁶⁵

The AKP and Erdoğanism

As demonstrated, the AKP no longer practices conservative democracy. What, then, is the party’s de facto ideology today?

The AKP’s ideology is defined in practice by who dictates it. It is fair to call that ideology Erdoğanism, as scholars like Ihsan Yilmaz have, because the AKP is governed by and centered around Erdoğan.¹⁶⁶ What are the characteristics of Erdoğanism?

¹⁶² Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 145–46.

¹⁶³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 146.

¹⁶⁴ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 147.

¹⁶⁵ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 148.

¹⁶⁶ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 120.

- **Authoritarianism.**¹⁶⁷ While governing Turkish political parties have long tended to support a strong central state, Erdoğanism has increased state power to a level unmatched since the advent of Turkey’s multiparty political system.
- **Cult of personality.**¹⁶⁸ Erdoğan has not objected to the construction of a cult of personality around him. A few notable examples of this cult building include:
 - The publication of a book, *Recep Tayyip Erdogan: The Sun of the Age*, which calls him an “idol for our youth”;¹⁶⁹
 - A claim by an AKP MP in 2011 that “[e]ven touching Erdogan is a form of worship;”¹⁷⁰ and
 - A statement by another AKP MP in 2014 that Erdogan “carries all the attributes of Allah in himself.”¹⁷¹
- **Populism.**¹⁷² Unlike in the AKP’s early years, Erdoğan has returned to the populist messaging that characterized predecessor Islamist parties. He identifies publicly as one of the “Black Turks”—i.e., conservative Muslims, who are portrayed as the genuine owners of Turkey—who stands against the arrogant, elite, secular “White Turks.”¹⁷³ A 2019 quantitative study indicated that Erdoğan was the only sitting right-wing leader who earned a populism score high enough to merit the label “very populist.”¹⁷⁴
- **Islamism, neo-Ottomanism, and Turkish nationalism.**¹⁷⁵ The AKP has Islamized Turkish institutions and governance, from the educational system and alcohol regulation to the reopening of the Hagia Sophia to the government’s lack of respect for the human rights of women and LGBT individuals. And Erdoğan sees himself as the restorer of Turkish national greatness to Ottoman times and sees Turkey—with himself at the helm—as the leader of the global Muslim community, or *ummah*, once more. As he said in a 2011 election victory speech, “Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul,

¹⁶⁷ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 127.

¹⁶⁸ Mustafa Akyol, “Is ‘Erdoganism’ Threat to Turkey’s Islamism?,” *Al-Monitor*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/03/turkey-erdoganism-is-becoming-distinct-from-islamism.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Mustafa Akyol, “Is ‘Erdoganism’ Threat to Turkey’s Islamism?,” *Al-Monitor*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/03/turkey-erdoganism-is-becoming-distinct-from-islamism.html>.

¹⁷⁰ Mustafa Akyol, “Is ‘Erdoganism’ Threat to Turkey’s Islamism?,” *Al-Monitor*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/03/turkey-erdoganism-is-becoming-distinct-from-islamism.html>.

¹⁷¹ Mustafa Akyol, “Is ‘Erdoganism’ Threat to Turkey’s Islamism?,” *Al-Monitor*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/03/turkey-erdoganism-is-becoming-distinct-from-islamism.html>.

¹⁷² Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 127, 153.

¹⁷³ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 134, 140.

¹⁷⁴ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 132; Ihsan Yilmaz, *Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), 4, <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>.

¹⁷⁵ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 127, 153.

Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir.”¹⁷⁶

- **Grievance, victimhood, and trauma.**¹⁷⁷ The AKP has cultivated the sense of victimhood and trauma Turkish Islamists have long felt as a result of their repeated persecution at the hands of Kemalists.¹⁷⁸ Erdoğan and company have connected those feelings with grievances held by some Muslims across the globe against their own governments and against the West.¹⁷⁹ Erdoğan portrays himself as the champion of the oppressed and defender of their interests and values.
- **Obsession with enemies and conspiracy theories.** The AKP uses the real or imagined existence of threats to Turks and Muslims to justify the government’s authoritarian measures. That is why they have otherized essentially half of the Turkish population—those who oppose the AKP—and particularly the GM and Kurdish political parties. Erdoğan has also propagated conspiracy theories depicting a wide array of enemies to Turkey. As Ihsan Yilmaz writes, “In the Erdoğanist narrative, opponents are conspiring enemies made up of everyone from Zionists, international bankers, interest lobbies, Islamophobes, the CIA, the American ambassador, CNN, Twitter, and the Gülen Movement (GM).”¹⁸⁰ Erdoğan exhibited this obsession in a speech on July 21, 2020, on the second anniversary of the establishment of the strong, executive presidency in Turkey. He said, “The Turkish nation and the Republic of Turkey have been passing through a historical period. In this period, there are all kinds of traps, all kinds of attacks, all kinds of conspiracies, all kinds of betrayal, all kinds of pain and all kinds of trouble.”¹⁸¹

Conclusion

The AKP has implemented an increasingly more authoritarian rule as it has consolidated its hold on power at the expense of its rivals. This does not mean that the AKP will inevitably remain this extreme; electoral defeat at the national level could cause it to seize power through outright dictatorship or to moderate in order to regain power later. Further, since the AKP has always been led by Erdoğan, it is unclear how the party would change if and when he ceases to exert control.

¹⁷⁶ “Turkey Election: Victorious Erdogan Pledges ‘Consensus,’” BBC News, June 13, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13744972>.

¹⁷⁷ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 128, 153.

¹⁷⁸ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 128–29.

¹⁷⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 128, 143.

¹⁸⁰ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 123.

¹⁸¹ Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 130.

However, it is premature to expect the AKP to moderate in the near future. Erdoğan is running for reelection in 2023 and would serve until 2028 if he wins, at which point he would be term-limited and bound to retire. But Erdoğan is only 69 years old, and authoritarian leaders have a way of clinging to power well beyond term limits, whether through changing the relevant laws or by exercising control through a figurehead. And if Erdoğan loses his reelection campaign and departs peacefully, he could still run for president again in five years—if he is not imprisoned or otherwise disqualified first for his abuses in office.