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The AKP and the Gülen: The End of a Historic Alliance

Sarah El-Kazaz

On June 7 of 2015, the ruling Justice and Development Party in Turkey (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, henceforth AKP) failed to secure an electoral majority in national parliamentary elections for the first time since it came to power in 2002. This election was particularly significant since the AKP hoped to secure a supermajority in Parliament that would then approve changing the constitutional powers of the newly elected president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,¹ from a purely ceremonial to a governing role. The AKP's defeat comes on the heels of several political developments that weakened the party's hold on power. Chief amongst them were: the Gezi Protests in 2013 in response to unprecedented police brutality against urban activists; the ability of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) to attract a large array of minority and progressive political groups under its umbrella; and a corruption probe implicating top AKP officials instigated by the Gülen movement, an active religious movement once known as the AKP's ally and principal grassroots mobilizer. This Brief focuses on explaining the rift between the AKP and Gülen movement as one of the most important political developments to take place in Turkey in the last two years, leading up to the AKP's defeat.

During the 2015 elections, almost all oppositional parties capitalized on a corruption probe instigated by the Gülen in December of 2013 and used it

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to undermine the AKP during its campaigns. On December 17, 2013, three ministers' sons, a mayor, and several businessmen connected to the AKP were arrested on charges of bribery.² The many suspects embroiled in the scandal were accused of bribery to facilitate construction schemes and of the illegal transfer of gold to Iran through the state-owned bank Halkbank.³ The probe soon escalated and led to the resignation of several key figures in the AKP's government, most notably then minister of environment and urban planning Erdoğan Bayraktar on December 25.⁴ Then prime minister and now president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's name also surfaced during the investigation, as leaked wiretaps recorded calls between Erdoğan and his son Bilal suggesting that they were hiding illegally obtained money.⁵ Moreover, Bayraktar declared to the press that if he was being asked to resign, then Prime Minister Erdoğan should also be resigning, since he was involved in the same deals.⁶

Although the corruption scandal itself sent shockwaves through the AKP's ranks, it proved to have been the by-product of an even deeper political crisis for the party: a rift with the Gülen. The police and prosecutors who coordinated the investigation and arrests were recognized as long-time members of the movement.⁷ The corruption probe was the final showdown that sealed a rift that had been developing between the AKP and the Gülen for over a year, which ended one of the most consequential alliances in Turkey's modern history. It was through this alliance that the AKP had accomplished an unprecedented feat in Turkish republican history by securing national electoral victories sufficient to form three consecutive majority governments in 2002, 2007, and 2011. Although the Gülen has not regrouped to form a fully-fledged opposition movement, its rift with the AKP was keenly felt during the 2015 elections. What brought such a long-lasting and significant alliance to its end?

The few analysts who have broached the subject have largely explained the rift as a product of the divergent ideological preferences of the two groups. According to such analysis, it was because the AKP and the Gülen movement originated from different religious communities and had divergent doctrinal commitments that they split in 2012–13. The main problem with this analysis is that it does not explain how the alliance had lasted for so long in spite of these differences. In other words, it cannot explain the *timing* of the split: Why now?

This Brief argues that the split was not an inevitable by-product of the underlying ideological differences between the two groups. Rather, it was a product of a shift, dating to around 2009, in the state-making project espoused by the AKP, which both politicized their differences and created a new economic regime in Turkey that was highly threatening to the Gülen. The Brief demonstrates that before 2009, the AKP had adopted a managerial model of governance that corrected for, but continued to follow, the main tenets of the post-1980 Turkish state-making project. After 2009, with newly gained confidence in its power base, the AKP shifted its orientation to an activist governance model that broke with several key tenets of the post-1980 state-making project. In particular, the AKP broke with three main tenets that had been crucial to the Gülen community's socioeconomic as well as ideological empowerment: market-driven economics, Kurdish non-recognition, and EU accession. It was the AKP's break with these tenets that transformed the long-dormant ideological differences between the AKP and the Gülen into incompatible policy agendas. Moreover, the AKP's new state-making project

threatened not only the Gülen's ideological project but also a regime of market-driven economics that was key to the community's success.

To develop this argument, the Brief is divided into two parts. I first discuss the socioeconomic and doctrinal roots of the Gülen and the AKP and the chronology of their alliance; I then explain the rift by discussing the shift in the AKP's governance model, why it occurred around 2009, and how it threatened the Gülen community's project. Finally, I briefly discuss the ramifications of this analysis for the expectations we should have of the coalition partners and policy agendas that both the Gülen and the AKP might adopt moving forward.

Origins of the Gülen and Its Relationship with the State

The Gülen community⁸ is named after its founder, Fethullah Gülen, who emerged from within a network of Sufi or "traditional religious" brotherhoods⁹ in Turkey in the 1970s. He worked to develop the teachings of his brotherhood's leader, Bediüzzaman Said-i-Nursi, into a program of societal change that dramatically expanded its reach over the 1980s and 90s. Gülen preached "a middle way" for Turkey between secularism and piety, and preached multicultural tolerance that was not only alluring in Turkey but also produced a large following in the West.¹⁰

It is important to note that, notwithstanding its international following, the Gülen philosophy was decidedly nationalist. The movement was seeking to spread Islamic values within Turkish society (and among Turkish migrant communities abroad), but not to establish an Islamic state as a political entity that would lead to a unified Muslim *ummah*, or community of believers around the globe.¹¹ Thus, in terms of international policy, the Gülen were against coordinating with other Islamic movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood, across state borders. On a domestic level, the Gülen's prioritization of the nation-state translated into their adherence to a Turkish nationalism that saw Turkey as a unified whole rather than as a community with divisions along ethnic or religious lines. Most importantly, in terms of the argument developed in this Brief, they advocated for the assimilation of ethnic Kurds into the Turkish nation rather than the awarding of minority rights to the Kurdish population.

The community's appeal did not lie only in its doctrine, however; the Gülen mobilized hundreds of thousands

of members through its emphasis on providing social services (*hizmet*), and on socioeconomic mobility. Its provision of social services was probably most effective in the 1990s with the dismantlement of the socialist state's welfare system and the emergence of weak coalition governments. To foster its members' socioeconomic mobility, the movement focused its efforts on education and entrepreneurship. The Gülen invested in an international network of private schools with low student-teacher ratios and in private Turkish college-entrance-exam preparation schools (*dershane* in Turkish). Gülenist *dershanes* became notorious for producing the highest test scorers in Turkey and constituted one of the most important access points of the community to non-members.¹² By 2012 there were 4,055 prep schools with 1.2 million students.¹³

In tandem with its educational agenda, the community urged its followers to actively pursue professional careers and entrepreneurial ventures. Its business networks coalesced into the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON). The Gülen embraced market forces as its community's main vehicle for socioeconomic mobility at the same time that the Turkish state was dismantling a socialist state project with the 1980 military coup. The Gülen supported the coup and allied itself with Turgut Özal's market-oriented policies when he became prime minister in 1983. As a result, Gülenist businesses benefited directly from export-oriented state subsidies. Also, as Kerem Öktem argues, the Gülen was able to benefit indirectly from the state's retreat from the economy. Community members could rely on intra-Gülen business networks that provided them with the support network needed to protect business ventures that operated outside state regulatory mechanisms. As a result, they had the advantage of relying on protections that were not available to entrepreneurs outside their network.¹⁴

The turning point in the Gülen's relationship with the post-1980s state came with the 1997 military coup, which forcibly ousted what had been the first Islamic political party to govern Turkey, the Refah (or Welfare) Party. When the coup took place in 1997, the Gülen privileged its support for the post-1980 state-making project over support for other Islamic-oriented groups and came out in support of the 1997 coup—despite which it was lumped in with all other Islamic-oriented movements and persecuted by the military. It is alleged that when Fethullah Gülen moved to the United States in 1999 (where he's been ever since) under the guise of ill health, he had actually fled in fear of being tried in military courts.¹⁵ It was in light of Gülen's disappointment with the so-called Turkish deep

state¹⁶ that he decided to ally the community with other oppositional movements, specifically the rising AKP.

Another key ramification of the Gülen's disillusionment with the deep state was the community's embedding of their networks within the machinery of the state. They were particularly successful at penetrating the echelons of the police. Gülen community members were regularly encouraged to pursue careers within police institutions, and did so successfully.¹⁷

The Origins and Oppositional History of the AKP

The core cadre of the AKP originated from within the ranks of the Refah (Welfare) Party led by Necmettin Erbakan, which was ousted in the 1997 coup and transformed into Fazilet (Virtue Party). Erbakan's movement saw itself as being in close ideological proximity to the larger Muslim Brotherhood network—and thus subscribed to a transnational notion of Islamism that the Gülen fervently opposed.¹⁸ Moreover, whereas Gülenists believe in religious education through “traditional religious brotherhoods,” most members of the AKP were educated through religious Imam Hatip schools¹⁹ that operated outside the public school system so as to emphasize religious education.

In addition to its ideological divergence vis-à-vis the Gülen, the AKP espoused a decidedly oppositional stance with respect to the deep state from its inception. Erbakan created the Welfare Party and built an electoral base that achieved unexpectedly large successes during municipal elections in 1994. It was at this election that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected mayor of Istanbul and rose to political prominence. The successful Welfare Party candidates delivered much-needed municipal services as basic as garbage collection and new water and sewage infrastructures²⁰ that helped them secure a national electoral victory, and the installation of Erbakan as prime minister, in 1996.

Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül, the AKP broke with Erbakan's Fazilet Party and competed in the 2002 elections as a separate party. According to Öktem, they “disassociated themselves from the more radical tenets of their ideological forefather Necmettin Erbakan and defined their party in the tradition of ‘conservative democracy’...[combining] religious piety, democracy and market commitment.”²¹ Their ideology, including their endorsement of Turgut

Özal's market-oriented policies, thereupon became much more compatible with Gülenist doctrine. Indeed, the economic base for the AKP developed out of a network of Anatolian entrepreneurs and industrialists known as the Anatolian Tigers, who had benefited from Özal's export-oriented growth project. (The AKP-affiliated Tigers subsequently formalized their network into MÜSIAD [The Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association].)²²

An Alliance and Its Demise: A Chronology

After the Gülen's disillusionment with the deep state, the Gülen and the AKP put aside their divergent roots and embraced their new ideological and socioeconomic affinities to form one of the most formidable alliances in Turkey's republican history, which secured unprecedented electoral success for the AKP, as discussed above, and proved just as worthwhile for the Gülen: It enabled the community to expand its presence in the cultural, economic, and educational spheres in Turkey and, most importantly, to access long impenetrable state institutions. When in 2010 the AKP was presented with an extraordinary moment to reform the country's judicial institutions, it saw members of the Gülen community as having the strongest legal credentials of anyone within its inner circle of trusted allies and so appointed them as judges to replace old guard elites.²³

The alliance flourished for over a decade until tensions emerged in 2012, revolving around the AKP's attempts at rapprochement with Kurdish guerillas (specifically the Kurdish Workers Party, or PKK). On February 7, 2012, Hakan Fidan, the head of the National Intelligence Organization, who was conducting secret talks with the PKK at the time, was temporarily arrested. The government saw the arrest as having been orchestrated by Gülen sympathizers in the police in order to foil the AKP-PKK talks.²⁴ In immediate retaliation, the government proposed a bill for outlawing all *dershanes* or prep schools in March 2012²⁵ that eventually passed on February 28, 2014,²⁶ thereby closing the prep schools so integral to Gülenist networks. The tensions reached a boiling point with the corruption scandals of December 2013. The AKP saw the arrests of its top officials as a set-up orchestrated by Gülenist sympathizers in the police and judiciary, and accused the Gülen of staging a “coup” through a “parallel state” or “*paralel devlet*.”²⁷ The alliance between the two groups was officially over, and media affiliates of both groups unleashed major campaigns against each other.

In 2014, the tides turned in favor of the AKP: They had a much more successful election year than expected in the aftermath of both the Gezi Park protests of May–June 2013 and the corruption scandal, and were up six points from their totals in the 2009 municipal elections.²⁸ In addition, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan secured around 52 percent of the vote in the first presidential election held in Turkey. Regaining their confidence in the machinery of the party, and notwithstanding the split with the Gülen, the government then continued its assault on the Gülen community and launched an investigation into illegal wiretaps, purged Gülen sympathizers from the police, and arrested journalists working in Gülen-affiliated media outlets.²⁹ Meanwhile, the AKP availed itself of new prosecutorial appointments and its majority in the Parliament to have most of the corruption charges dropped, without even trials that may have revealed unsavory evidence of corruption. The newly appointed prosecutorial office acquitted fifty-three people investigated under the corruption probe,³⁰ and Parliament voted on January 20, 2015, against sending the cases of the four ex-ministers implicated in the probe to the Supreme Court. For a brief year, it seemed that the AKP had escaped unscathed both from the ramifications of the corruption probe and from its split with the Gülen.

The AKP's inability to secure a majority in the parliamentary elections of June 7, 2015, changed that calculation dramatically, however. With the loss of its electoral dominance, the AKP will now have to cooperate with other factions and sectors of society in governing Turkey, and will lose the control it had gained over its state-making project. In addition, new governments may reopen the corruption files, and in so doing may implicate key AKP players, including Erdoğan—as several of the electoral campaigns promised stronger controls over the construction sector and the end of impunity for corrupt officials.

Explaining the Rift

The question remains: What explains the demise of the alliance between the AKP and the Gülen after so many years of harmony? Some analysts have pointed to ideological differences—in particular, the Gülen's nationalist tendencies in contrast to the AKP's transnational orientation—as accounting for the rift.³¹ (Others have also pointed to the conflicting leadership personalities of Fethullah Gülen and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.) The main problem with this explanation is that it cannot account for why the alliance had survived

for so long in spite of these underlying differences. I argue that careful attention to the timing of the rift reveals that the split was not inevitable, but was rather a by-product of a dramatic shift in the state-making project espoused by the AKP that transformed these dormant ideological differences into a policy agenda that the Gülen experienced as threatening.

The AKP practiced a model of managerial governance during its first term in office that both prioritized corrective measures with respect to policy agendas pursued by preceding governments (such as stabilizing the economy after the 2001 inflation crisis and improving Turkey's EU accession portfolio) and worked to erode the military's power to overturn democratically elected governments. But after solidifying their power base sometime in 2009, the AKP shifted its governance model to an activist approach that aggressively implemented long-held but dormant AKP policy preferences as well as new policy preferences that had developed as a consequence of its first term in office. This shift toward an activist mode of governance broke with three key tenets that had pervaded the Turkish state-making project since the 1980 coup: market-driven economics, nationalist policies vis-à-vis Turkey's Kurdish minority, and EU accession.

The Gülen saw the AKP's break with these three tenets as disastrous for its project of both empowering its community and propagating its philosophy of the ideal relationship between religion and politics. Socioeconomic mobility for Gülen members was entirely predicated on market-driven economics, and the AKP ruling regime's developmentalist economic interventions threatened that mobility. The Gülen's commitment to Turkish nationalism entailed a staunch stance against the recognition of Kurds as a minority. And EU accession was a key political goal for the Gülen, both because it believed, as a key tenet, in the compatibility of Islamic and Western values and, more practically, because it would facilitate the logistical coordination of Gülen chapters in Turkey and across Europe. Thus, it is not simply that underlying ideological differences eventually caught up with the alliance and led to the rift; rather, after 2009 the AKP adopted a new state-making project that threatened the Gülen both economically and ideologically. In this section I discuss first the developments that helped solidify the AKP's popular base and embeddedness within state institutions by 2009, and then turn to tracing the transformation in the AKP's governing model with a focus on the break with the three governance tenets of: market-driven economics, EU accession and nationalist Kurdish non-recognition.

Solidifying the Base: The AKP's Power Consolidation

The AKP was careful to both solidify its popular base and secure its support within state institutions before launching its new state-making project. Its predecessors' experiences with military coups had forewarned the AKP of the dangers of pursuing an aggressive political agenda too quickly, so it opted instead for a gradualist approach, building its grassroots support and vote share over time. By the 2009 municipal elections, its vote share had stabilized at over 40 percent.

What seemed more difficult to the AKP was dislodging the threat of a military coup. It saw the military's power to orchestrate such coups as linked to a deeper network of elites in the military, judiciary, and intelligence community that had come to be known as the Turkish "deep state." And it was actually the increasing success of the Gülen community after 1999 in embedding itself within the police that facilitated the erosion of the military's power. In June of 2007, police uncovered a chest of grenades in the Black Sea town of Trabzon that belonged to the Special Forces Command, a clandestine security network. This discovery launched a series of investigations that came to be dubbed Ergenekon.³² Leaks from the investigations, along with a barrage of allegations and rumors from the media, from whistleblowers, and from factions within the network itself yielded gruesome accounts of violence and havoc that became associated with the deep state in the Turkish public sphere; they powerfully shocked the popular imagination and severely damaged the reputation of the military.

The AKP quickly moved to exploit the intensity of the public's shock through a referendum on September 12, 2010, that allowed for the abolition of the 1980 constitution that had guaranteed impunity for coup perpetrators, and that gave Parliament emergency constitutional powers for six months, including the power to choose judges on the Constitutional Court and on the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors.³³ It was through these reforms that the old guard was purged and Gülen sympathizers came to occupy important positions in the judiciary.³⁴

As a consequence of these constitutional and judicial changes, many members of the military establishment and republican elite were tried and jailed, leaving the military's power to instigate a coup in shambles.³⁵ The AKP no longer had to contend with the looming threat of a military coup from within Turkish state institutions. It had secured the popular and institutional support it saw as necessary to move beyond governing through corrective

measures that perpetuated past policy to implementing its own activist political agenda.

Changing the Agenda: Developmentalism

The first tenet of post-1980 Turkish state governance that the AKP started to reverse after 2009 was the promotion of market-driven economics. When the AKP was first elected into office in 2002, it was primarily dedicated to correcting the measures that had led to the 2001 inflation crisis and rectifying the workings of market-driven economics. The AKP's rise to power was dependent on the success of the Anatolian Tigers, who were entirely indebted to post-1980 market liberalization in Turkey. The AKP thus spent its first term in office getting inflation rates down from 80 percent to 10 percent and increasing foreign direct investments, which tripled between 2002 and 2005. They celebrated their success in restoring and accelerating the market's growth by slashing six zeros from the Turkish lira in 2005.³⁶ Through managerial governance, they were continuing Özal's legacy of promoting a market-driven economy.

The tide turned, however, when decreasing marginal returns on the Anatolian Tigers' investments made it clear that liberal market mechanisms would push growth only so far without state intervention to galvanize new markets. It was with this realization that the AKP decided to launch an aggressive developmentalist project to create new markets through the machinery of state governance. The state turned to two arenas. First, it launched a campaign for boosting the construction sector and urban redevelopment across Turkey's cities. Property rights arrangements, both formal and informal, that had long been seen as obstacles to real estate development were targeted through new legislation. In 2005, Parliament passed the Preservation and Renewal Law (no. 5366), which enabled the state to declare zones of the historical city of Istanbul "renewal areas" to be redeveloped through public-private partnerships. Crucially, the legislation decreed that private property could be expropriated by the state or developers through "emergency nationalization" or "*acil kamulaştırma*" (in a manner similar to eminent domain in the United States) if urban renewal plans required it.

The intervention of the state to create these real estate markets was first tested before 2009, in two historical neighborhoods. After it solidified its power base in 2009, the government implemented the law in several other historical neighborhoods. More dramatically, Parliament then passed the *Afet Yasası* or Disaster Law (no. 6306) in May of 2012, which stipulated that any building that did not pass the state's inspection with respect to earthquake

safety standards would be subject to “emergency nationalization” and redevelopment through government tenders. Private property as Turkish citizens had known it for decades had been dealt a deathblow, and a new, government-enabled real estate market was born. Hundreds of urban renewal projects have been initiated through the implementation of these laws, displacing hundreds of thousands of residents across the country.

The second prong of this developmental project was the AKP’s investment in several mega-infrastructure projects reminiscent of the developmentalist projects implemented by other modernizers in the region, such as Iran’s Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Turkey’s own Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. These mega-projects included building a third bridge across the Bosphorus in Istanbul, impacting thousands of residents and encroaching on protected forest land in the city, and constructing a third airport in Istanbul. The most grandiose of these projects is the plan to dig a new canal parallel to the Bosphorus right through Istanbul, to be named Kanal Istanbul. Although the majority of these urban renewal and infrastructure projects would be implemented by private sector companies, access to these projects was controlled through government tenders, and activists have documented how interconnected the winners of these government tenders were with AKP ruling regime circles.³⁷

The Gülen experienced the precariousness of access to these new markets first-hand. Its business association, TUKSON, originally benefited from access to these state-controlled real estate markets, but it was immediately sidelined from these deals once it was seen as attempting to derail the AKP’s talks with the Kurdish PKK. (See below.) The market forces so integral to the socioeconomic mobility of the Gülen’s members were now threatened by the state’s increasing intervention in the creation of new markets. Moreover, the shift toward sweeping urban development and infrastructure programs often happens at the expense of social services provision and requires the massive displacement of citizens across the country. From a purely doctrinal standpoint, this approach was also antithetical to the Gülen’s commitment to service or *hizmet*. It was no coincidence, therefore, that the Gülen targeted the AKP’s construction schemes through its corruption probes. It was sending a message about the incompatibility of the AKP’s interventionist developmental program with its own economic agenda.

Changing the Agenda: The Kurdish Question

Throughout its first term, the AKP attempted to normalize relations between the state and Turkey’s

Kurdish minority. It did so through measures that allowed for instruction in of the Kurdish language in schools and the airing of Kurdish-language programming on TV and radio stations, which had been banned since the inception of the Republic.³⁸ The war with Kurdish guerillas remained as strong as ever, however, and the state launched several campaigns involving the arrest of Kurdish activists. After 2009 the AKP’s stance changed, and it actively sought rapprochement with Turkish guerillas through secret talks documented to have started as early as 2010.³⁹ Those talks eventually led to a ceasefire in April of 2013. There have been tensions since then, and state-Kurdish relations were especially strained on account of the state’s refusal to allow Kurds to cross the border to aid in the war with ISIL in Kobani, but the ceasefire remains the most significant truce between Kurds and the state since the inception of the Turkish Republic.

The AKP’s attempt at rapprochement with the PKK was at odds with the Gülen’s commitment to fostering a unified Turkish nation within the country’s borders. The minor improvements in the Kurds’ status that the AKP had implemented pre-2009 were already seen by the Gülen as problematically fostering a divided nation with distinct minorities; but the AKP’s coupling of these advancements with violent incursions against Kurdish guerillas and the jailing of Kurdish activists had kept the Gülen’s concerns at bay. The rapprochement with the PKK resolved this evident contradiction in a direction that was radically opposed to the Gülen’s nationalist agenda: Recognition of the PKK’s demands for Kurdish minority rights would, in the eyes of the Gülen, irrevocably fracture the Turkish nation. And because nationalism was at the heart of the Gülen’s ideology and doctrine, foiling the PKK talks thus became the spark that ignited tensions between the AKP and the Gülen.

Changing the Agenda: Foreign Policy and EU accession

Finally, the AKP adopted a corrective and managerial approach to foreign policy during its first term. The party came to power vowing to implement a policy of “strategic depth”—first developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, who became foreign minister in 2009 and prime minister in 2014. The policy revolved around intensifying the country’s efforts to join the EU and implement accession reforms, as well as ending Turkey’s isolationist position. With respect to the latter, the AKP planned to increase engagement with Turkey’s neighbors so long as relations remained balanced in a way that did not prioritize one neighbor over another—thereby implementing what was called the “zero problems” policy. But although greater engagement was part of the policy, the AKP’s main focus during its

first term was on EU accession. The AKP initially made unprecedented strides in fulfilling EU accession terms and winning several votes of confidence from EU members in the mid-2000s. But severe disillusionment followed in December 2006, when after two years of accession talks, it became clear that the process was unlikely to achieve its goal.⁴⁰ It was after the sour results of EU accession negotiations that Turkey began to engage more heavily with its neighbors, especially its Middle Eastern neighbors. And the AKP seemed to be quite successful at maintaining its “zero problems” policy during its initial forays into building good relations with its neighbors.

The success of that policy was soon rattled, however, by two major events: the Gaza War of 2009 and the Arab Spring. The Gaza War of 2009 occasioned the first rift between Turkey and one of its neighbors. Erdoğan was shocked that the incursion had taken place in spite of negotiations supported by Turkey between Israel and the Palestinians, and he actively sought to end whatever amicable relations existed between Turkey and Israel. But the AKP regarded the ensuing rupture as an isolated incident that should not be read as threatening its “zero problems” policy. The government argued that Israel was aggressively pursuing hostile relations with its neighbors that would compromise any government’s attempt to engage with it; this, they insisted, would not compromise Turkey’s engagement with its other neighbors.

With the outbreak of the Arab Spring of 2011, however, the AKP had to make decisions with much larger implications. It was either going to maintain its policy of engagement—and therefore have to make a series of decisions choosing between supporting either state leaders or revolting populations—or else disengage from the region altogether. Because of its newly found confidence in its power base, the AKP chose a policy of engagement and tough choices. The AKP’s belief that it was now immune from the threat of a military coup gave it unprecedented confidence in pursuing an engaged foreign policy that would reveal its preferences with respect to allies in the region.

The party also operated on the assumption that its national electoral stability was more reliant on domestic socioeconomic outcomes than on foreign policy decisions. Moreover, it was wedded to a majoritarian understanding of democracy that readily ignored minority dissenting voices. Based on these assumptions, the AKP decided that its stable electoral base afforded it the leeway to pursue potentially unpopular foreign policies. Turkey thus

became heavily embroiled in the Syrian conflict, took a strong stance regarding intervention in Libya, and severed relations with Egypt after a military coup ousted the Muslim Brotherhood from power.⁴¹ Turkey was suddenly very aggressively engaged in the region, and in a partisan fashion not really consistent with “zero problems.”

The AKP’s confidence and sense of impunity soon unraveled, however. First, refugee flows into the country had a major impact on the very socioeconomic indicators that ensured the AKP’s domestic electoral base. More importantly in terms of this Brief’s subject, the AKP’s new foreign policy direction threatened its most important grassroots mobilizer, the Gülen, in two ways. First, the new policy shattered all hope of Turkey’s integration within the European sphere. And the AKP’s increased engagement with its Middle Eastern neighbors threatened to embroil Turkish politics in transnational Islamism, which was antithetical to the Gülen’s nationalist doctrine that shunned both forming connections with Islamic groups outside Turkey’s borders, and taking any action that might bring about a larger Muslim *ummah*.

Conclusion

Recognizing that the split between the Gülen and the AKP was not an inevitable outcome of underlying ideological differences but rather was provoked by the AKP’s post-2009 state-making project and its threatening (to the Gülen) policy agendas is important not only for explaining the rift, but also for thinking about the future of Turkish politics. Based on the alliances the Gülen struck with the AKP, and with the post-1980 Özal government that preceded it, most likely that coalitions forming in opposition to the AKP may include groups, including the Gülen, who embrace different ideological preferences but share policy priorities. This Brief highlights the importance of seeing the AKP’s state-making project as one that privileges many political and economic goals that go beyond the strict Islamization of public space. In particular, and given the importance of the Anatolian Tigers to its political base, the AKP regularly privileges policies that empower its developmentalist agenda over other concerns. It is likely, therefore, that the AKP will choose its coalition partners in the new government on the basis of shared economic goals rather than shared identity categories.

Endnotes

- 1 Erdoğan ran in (and won) the first presidential election to be held in modern Turkey in the hope of continuing his dominance in Turkish politics after having completed three terms as prime minister.
- 2 “New Details Revealed about Turkey’s Ongoing Graft Probe,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 18, 2013.*
- 3 “Turkey’s Massive Corruption Case Dropped by Prosecutor,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 17, 2014.*
- 4 “Environment Minister Bayraktar Announces Resignation, Calls on PM Erdoğan to Quit,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 25, 2013.*
- 5 “Tayyip Erdoğan’s Leaked Phone Calls,” *Revolution News*, [Youtube.com \[in Turkish\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...) and *CHNAR NETT*, [Youtube.com \[in English\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...).*
- 6 “Environment Minister Bayraktar Announces Resignation, Calls on PM Erdoğan to Quit.”
- 7 Reuben Silverman, “The Shoebox Is on the Other Foot: Turkey’s Year of Retaliation,” *Jadaliyya*, December 21, 2014.*
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