

Whistling in the Dark

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When Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan can claim that [only Turkey can save the EU](#) from the deadlock it has fallen into, he is a prey to wishful thinking, or at best, whistling in the dark.

Turkey is itself a divided nation, torn between two visions for its future. The founder of modern Turkey, the victorious general, Mustafa Kemal, later named Atatürk ('the father of the Turks'), set his republic on the path towards the West.

Mustafa Kemal's republic, created in 1923, abolished the caliphate and with [the Hat Law](#) and the Independence Tribunals secularism was strictly enforced. The religious schools ('madrasas') were closed, the religious brotherhoods ('tarikats') were banned and Islamic law ('sharia') was replaced with legislation based on that in Switzerland, Italy and Germany. Equality between men and women was also established.

Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party ('Refah Partisi'), founded in 1983, set out to turn back the clock. The RP, which became Turkey's largest political party, with its [National Vision](#) set out to establish '[a just order](#)' (sharia), but in 1998 was dissolved by the Constitutional Court for being a "centre of activities contrary to the principles of secularism."

Erbakan was also mentor for Recep Tayyip Erdogan, now Turkey's president, who in 1994 was elected as RP's mayor of Istanbul. Four years later Erdogan was sent to prison for four months for quoting [a nationalist poem from 1912](#), but he had already [made clear](#), "Democracy is not our aim. It is the vehicle."

When mayor, Erdogan had [planned to concentrate power](#) in the hands of one person and in 2001 the AKP (Justice and Development Party) was founded. When the AKP came to power in 2002, [it presented itself](#) as moderate, Westward-looking and neo-liberal, and the U.S. and the EU bought the AKP's narrative.

In 1999 the EU declared Turkey a candidate country, and the AKP made strategic use of EU conditionality to further its aims. Once it had emasculated the military and secular establishment in a series of [show trials](#) from 2008 to 2013 , it abandoned the EU process.

EU accession talks with Turkey, which began in October 2005, ground to a standstill in December 2006. The EU Council decided to freeze the opening of eight negotiating chapters ([out of 33](#)) because of Turkey's refusal to recognize Cyprus. France blocked four more and Cyprus six.

The role of religion

Once the AKP had established civil hegemony, it set about restoring the role of religion in public life with the removal of the headscarf ban and putting the emphasis on [religious \('imam-hatip'\) high schools](#) and [Qu'ran courses](#). The Religious Affairs Directorate ('[Diyamet](#)') with its 90,000 mosques has come to play a central role. As the AKP is an essentially grass roots movement, an alliance with the Gülen movement's educated cadres was necessary to fill positions in state administration with supporters.

Erdogan's intention to create "a pious generation" backfired with [the Gezi Park protests in 2013](#) which, apart from the rivalry from [the Gülen movement](#), was the greatest threat to his regime. The protests were brutally crushed and the Gülen movement was eliminated in the aftermath of [the attempted coup in July 2016](#).

Turkey's foreign minister and later prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, in 2013 dismissed the century of republican rule as "[a parenthesis](#)" and dreamed of [a new world order \('nizam-i âlem'\)](#), an Ottoman concept whereby the world order, political, social, and economic, was ruled by religion (Islam). And Turkey would play a central role.

Davutoglu was brought down in [an internal coup](#) in 2016 and it was Islamic scholar Ibrahim Kalin who succeeded him as ideologue and Erdogan's chief advisor. Kalin's [keynote speech](#) at the Istanbul Forum in October 2012 is a blueprint for Turkey's foreign policy and it was only thanks to a friendly Turkish editor I got a copy.

Kalin posits a post-Western political order in which the West does not have a monopoly over the democracy debate and the global human rights discourse. Further, he mentions the growing gap between Islamic and Western notions of what constitutes sacred religious rights and freedom of expression.

This pivots towards [the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam](#) rather than the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the European Convention. It also dovetails with Kalin's call for a value-based and principled foreign policy.

In 2022 [at the Qatar Forum](#) Kalin reiterated his call for a new global security architecture, which is in harmony with the views expressed by Vladimir Putin at [a plenary session of the Valdai Club](#) the same year. Kalin is now head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT).

Relations with the EU

President Erdogan has stated that full membership of the EU is [Turkey's strategic goal](#) but as Günter Seufert from the SWP in Berlin [earlier noted](#), EU membership has become less a goal in itself for the majority of Turks than an instrument to facilitate their country's continued economic development.

[A draft report](#) by the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee notes that the EU is by far Turkey's largest trading partner and its primary source of foreign direct investment. Nevertheless, the Turkish government has failed to address the country's fundamental democratic shortcomings, for which reason the accession process cannot be resumed.

The report also recognizes Turkey's strategic and geopolitical value, which has led Erdogan to state that Europe's security is [unimaginable without Turkey](#). Turkey's foreign minister, Hakan Fidan, who has [stated](#) that a European security architecture that excludes Turkey would be unrealistic, also took part in [the London summit](#), "a coalition of the willing".

The ball is in Turkey's court. High level talks with the EU are planned to discuss an update of the customs union and visa liberalisation, but one of the five criteria Turkey still needs to meet to gain access to [Schengen](#) is a narrowing of its definition of terrorism. Turkey's broad anti-terrorism laws are an instrument to silence dissent.

There is also the question of the release of the Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtas and the civic leader Osman Kavala, whose release has been mandated by the European Court of Human Rights. But Erdogan is [adamant](#). "I'm sorry. We're going our way, you go yours."

In the best of all possible worlds, Turkey would be ideally placed as the honest broker to negotiate a solution to Ukraine's war with Russia. The stumbling block is 'honest'. There is not only the ongoing case against the Turkish state bank Halkbank, which has been [indicted](#) for helping funnel more than \$20 billion for Iran in violation of U.S. sanctions.

There is also [the investigation by the U.S. Justice Department](#) of the way Russia and Turkey used Turkey's nuclear project to evade U.S. sanctions imposed on Russia's central bank. Cleaning Turkey's Augean stables will be a Herculean task.