Rise of Political Islam in Turkey and its Effects on Turkish-Syrian Relations

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explain the rise of political Islam in the last two decades in Turkey and its effects on Turkish Syrian relations. I believe, without referring to the historical and theoretical background of Political Islam, it would not be easy to understand the domestic and foreign political practices of Turkey in recent years. In this respect, within the scope of this paper following questions will be explored in a combination; Will Turkey move away from its traditional modernity pattern? What effects will political Islam have on domestic and international politics? What effects will Turkish-Syria tension create on regional security dynamics?

Introduction:

Turkey is one of the main role players in the Middle East since the medieval ages. It has broadly effected the political, economic, and military interactions amongst the Middle Eastern societies, as well as the policies of great powers in the region. Ottomans have dominated the region more than four centuries until the end of the 19th century. But, after the collapse of Ottoman Empire, the region has entered into a new era, in which Turkey as a modern nation-state has retreated from the Middle East not only in physical borders but also in foreign politics. Starting with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Turkey turned its face to the West as a Muslim-majority country, but also as a secular democratic state, and a NATO member.

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With the end of Cold War, in parallel with the rise of globalization, political Islam in a global context has apparently affected Turkish domestic politics. This rise of Islam in a secular state has attracted the attention of West and other international circles. Since the beginning of Turkish Republican Era in the early 1920s, political Islam has never played such a dominant role in Turkish political life and never reached a significant socio-political power. However, enjoying the winds of globalization in the post-cold war term, political Islam have made significant changes on its political agenda contrary to its old discourse, and did not hesitate to embrace and widely use the values of western liberal democracy, human rights and rules of liberal economy.

Political Islam's Transformation in Global Era

In global context, there is a transformation from the old revolutionary Islamist politics which were refusing western values, into a kind of liberal political Islam using western methods to govern the state and the society. In this respect, JDP (Justice and Development Party) of Turkey, has proved to be a significant sample, rejecting the politics and discourse of old reformist Islamist parties of 1970s and 1980s.[1]. As Oliver Roy (2004) argues, political Islamists have not changed their rigid agenda of creating a society on Islamist rules, but only their methods and assets.[2] It is a common perception that contemporary religious revival in Islam is targeting not only the society but also the state institutions which is the case in Turkey in the last decade. As Peter Mandaville asserts, political Islamists have a three-phase agenda of short, medium and long terms. In the short term, they aim to transform the constitutional institutions according to the principles of their political aims. In mid-term they aim to transform the society into an Islamist society with acculturation and re-Islamisation projects. In the long term, although perceived as a utopia,   their final aim is to create the global Ummah.[3]

Roy argues political Islam has been deeply affected by globalization and moves towards building a universal religious identity, delinked from any specific culture. The Islamists of post cold-war era do not see Islam merely as a religion, but a political ideology that should shape all aspects of life over the society and the state structure. They claim for opening a wider window to the politics and embrace democracy and civil society. In this sense, they oppose against any revolutionary action dissimilar to the Islamist parties of cold-

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[1] Aydin, S., Cakir, R. (2007), Political Islam in Turkey, Center for European Policy Studies (Internet), 12th April pp. 1-2 available from: < http://www.ceps.eu/book/political-islam-turkey> (accessed August 14th, 2012)

[2] Roy, O., 2004, *Globalized Islam,* C.Hurst and Co. Ltd. Press ,London, p.25-29

[3] Mandaville, P., 2007, *Global Political Islam*, Routledge Press, New York, p.45-47

war era, and prefer a soft re-Islamisation of the society through the means of liberal economy.[4] According to them, a true Islamic society can be created by effecting daily life of individuals and society as well as reforming and transforming the constitutional actors and institutions. Politics, law, economy, social justice, foreign affairs are basic areas they exert their own methods and ideology. They widely use the opportunities provided by globalization in terms of communication, fundraising, idea sharing and similar. Brotherhood upon a religious identity and the promotion of religiosity are basic tenets for them, in a sense of downgrading the nationalist ideas. In the global age, they see the whole world as their zone of influence, and extend their relations and ideas across the time and space. Turkey's experiences in the last two decades provide us with valuable information in this respect, like a battle ground between secular and Islamist forces in almost every aspect of individual and societal life and state procedures.

In a historical context, for Muslims, their religion has never been the sole paramount importance in political aspect. At the beginning of the 20th century, their aim was to gain independence from colonial rule of Europe and the main drive was nationalism.[5] Although religion has been leverage in the hands of the politicians of the states or Non-State Actors in the Middle East, they have never quit nationalist arguments. In this sense, insisting on a sole religious identity has difficulties to fit the regional politics of the Middle East.

Nationality has been used, as Gamal Abdel Nasser, the President of Egypt did in 1950s and 1960s, in a supra-national context under the name of Arab Nationalism, and sometimes in a narrower context such as Palestinian nationalism as Arafat did. Today, although founded upon an Islamist discourse, even Hamas and Hezbollah do not hesitate to use nationalist rhetoric to maintain the solidarity amongst the Palestinians and Lebanese people, to the extent of accusing Arafat for betraying the "national interests" of Palestinians. The nationalist movements amongst the Muslim societies are not limited merely to the conflictual geographies of the Middle East. For instance, the foreign policies of Iran during and after the cold-war have been shaped by strong nationalist sentiments. Iran has not hesitated to support Christian Armenia against Shia Azerbaijan and to join a strategic axis with Russia against Muslim Turkey. The movements in Yemen, in Sudan and in Algeria (FIS), widely use nationalist arguments and even link the rationality of their presence to sole national aims. So, it would not be wrong to assert that Islamist political movements are passing through a

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[4] Roy, 2004, p.80-82
[5] Mandaville, 2007, p.53

nationalization process.[6] On the other hand, the governing party in Turkey (JDP/Justice and Development Party) seems to have difficulties to conduct a sound foreign policy amongst the Muslim Middle Eastern States merely focusing on arguments such as religious brotherhood and neo-Ottomanism.

Political Islam and Turkey

Since 1950s, the leaders of Islamist parties in Turkey have used a jargon injecting the idea that Muslim religion is the basic norm connecting Turkish society casting the identity of the individuals. In recent years, Prime Minister R. Tayyip Erdoğan particularly during his election campaigns, have widely used these arguments. But actually, the founding politicians of Turkish Republic have systematically established the conditions of forming a society upon a broader and contemporary nationalism idea, since the very early years of the republic. They were aware of the nation-state process in the western world and how a modern state could rise upon the values and norms, common culture and other subjectivist ideals. As Kemal Gozler asserts they have been influenced by the ideas of French thinker Ernest Renan (1823-1892), who refused the objectivist and narrow descriptions of national identity based on a mere religion, on a race, or a hegemonic language.[7]

According to the founders of Turkish Republic, as the successor of a multi-religious and multi-nationalist empire which reigned over three continents for centuries, could best be founded upon a secular and modern nationalism embracing every citizen living in the country regardless of their religion, sect, ethnic background and personal appearances. This was a revolutionary approach to the idea of modern nationality while the totalitarian regimes in Europe in 1930s were rising. They were aware that promoting religion as the basic value, would result in separation of the society into sects, tariqats (religious paths) and demolish the ties amongst the different layers of the society. Promoting religiosity in a quasi-mosaic society like Turkey would end up fuelling ethnic separation movements, because religion and sects function as the main factors in forming a different ethnic identity. One lesson learned by the founders of the republic was the uprisings in Turkey during the independence war. In addition to military fronts against the colonial powers, there was also an internal front opened by religious uprisings. These uprisings have been triggered by religious leaders of different

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[6] Roy, 2004, p. 62-64

[7] Gözler, K (2001) Devletin Bir Unsuru Olarak 'Millet' Kavramı. Türkiye Günlüğü No. 64 (Internet) , Winter 2001, pp.108-123. Available from <htpp:// www.anayasa.gen.tr/millet.htm> (Accessed August 13th, 2012).

sects and forced the national movement to spend huge efforts to control them in the heart of Anatolia while conducting a death-or live campaign against colonial powers.

On the other hand, the argument about placing the religion to the upper stage of the principles forming the national identity is against the modernity.[8] Modernity, throughout a long-range process, has downgraded the role of religion in public sphere to the domain of the private. A conflict between the public discourse and the private life of individuals has emerged with the hands of current governing party in Turkey. In Turkish media today the "neighborhood pressure" is a common description used to formulize the position of a female individual within a conservative neighborhood forcing her to use headscarf when leaving the house.

Another critic the political Islamists assert is that current states are not "real secular" states. They argue that, the societies of today's Muslim but secular states are not real societies but artificial ones, termed and casted by secular state ideology. That is why those artificial societies could not fill the gap between the religion and the state bureaucracy and start a process that would lead to a real secular society. Prime Minister Erdogan raises this argument often, saying that "…we are real seculars, not those elites who governed the state for decades."[9] In his visit to Egypt in 2011, he went one step further and said to the Muslim Brotherhood leaders of Egypt; "I am not a secular person, but I govern a secular state." (Cairo, 14 September 2011), in a manner that implies there is no obstacle for a Muslim to live in a secular state or to hold a role in a secular state structure. His description looks like a contemporary description of the principles of the founder of Muslim Brotherhood (MB) Hassan al-Bannah (1906-49). Al-Bannah, in a nutshell, has emphasized the possibility of being modern, while remaining loyal to true Islam.

Political Islam vs Secularism

Nationalism has a historical background extending to mid-19th century in the Ottoman Empire. The nationalism winds of French revolution have also affected the ruling cadres of Ottoman Empire. M. Kemal Ataturk as one of the leading military figures in final years of Ottoman Empire has taken active roles in this process. When it was clear that there is no way to keep the empire to survive after the WWI, Mustafa Kemal a young general, emerged as the leader of Turkish Independence movement in Ankara at the heart of Anatolia. A three-year-

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[8] Mandaville, P., 2001,*Transnational Muslim Politics*, Routledge Press, New York, p.11
[9] Available at http://www.worldcrunch.com/don-t-be-afraid-secularism-how-erdogan-s-egypt-tour-looks-turkey/3757

struggle to found a modern republic against colonial military powers has continued after the military victory, two more decades until late 1930s to realize the penetration of reforms and modernization acts into the heart and brain of every individual. The state ideology known as Kemalism has been a pragmatic type of state nationalism and has aimed to create a nation-state under Turkish nationalism based on not religious or racist dogmas but under the principles of a modern secular nation understanding. An industrial-based economic development was one of the main pillars of this new and modern state beside the educational, cultural, bureaucratic and military revolutions. The identity of Turkish nationalism has been perceived by the leading cadre of young republic not as of a narrow Islamic history but of a broader pre-Islamic Turkic civilizations extending to Central Asia.

In Turkey the fundamentalist religious circles claim that, the founding father of republic Kemal Ataturk and his one party system has demolished the capability of Islam by keeping the religion under strict control to establish a much more secular and democratic society. Such a discourse is used also by some contemporary political scientist such as Ahmet T.Kuru asserting that JDP defends secularism and Kemalism aims to remove religion from public sphere.[10]

On the other hand, the authors writing on religion and politics have a common perception that, the relations, norms, structures between the Christianity and secular state structure does not fit the Muslim religion. The hierarchic structure in Christianity and the objectivist features of Church and related religious institutions have helped the formation of nation-state process, and this mutual interaction has identified the borders of religion within the state and society. But Islam religion does not possess a similar capability because Islam has a horizontal structure rather than a vertical hierarchy. There is a general perception amongst Turkish intellectual circles that the distance between the secular ruling elites, the state bureaucracy and the religion has resulted in the absence of secularization process between these role players. The cold approach of secular state to religion and attempts to control it has pushed the religious circles underground, organizing at homes and neighborhoods. This process has formed revolutionary political movements amongst the sects against the secular state.

What was the position of religion and religious personalities within this new modern and secular republic? Ataturk and his fellows have proved a different approach towards the religion and its effects upon the society. For them religion and divine thoughts were inevitable

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[10] Kuru, A.T., "Secularism in Turkey", Insight Turkey, vol. 10, no 3/2008 pp. 101-110

elements of individual and social life. They were not against the religion but the misuse of religion in Muslim world. They have claimed that Muslim religion has been misused and moved out of its correct path for centuries. The clerics and politicians have mutually misused the power of divine teachings in a way to suppress the society and prevent the individual and society from revolutionary developments in all aspects of life, particularly of positive science and intellectual modernization unlike European societies. New modern republic approached the religion as a matter of private life in individual's conscious, rather than being a dominant societal factor regulating all aspects of community and state. They preferred to lay the foundations of a society composed of individuals free in their religious thoughts rather than holding them as an ummah of medieval ages under sole control of religio-political authority.

There was a requirement to take the religion under the control of state. For this aim, Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has been established and a vertical hierarchical structure has been built connecting all religious figures and institutions including the mosques and Qur'anic schools beginning from the smallest villages towards the governmental center, Ankara. Imam-hatip schools have been founded in order to raise all state-licensed imams for religious service. Since the establishment of Republic in 1923 until early 1950s, a heavy secular-nationalization process has taken place in Turkey. After death of Ataturk, in 1938, and particularly starting with multiple-party system in 1946 elections, reactions led by Islamic circles have started against this secularization process. In parallel with the emergence of Islamist movements amongst Indian Muslims and Egypt in 1940s, the Islamist circles in Turkey have organized themselves as political parties.

JDP; A Liberal Democracy or a Totalitarian Messiahism?

As discussed by Hannah Arendt in her seminal work "Origins of Totalitarianism" the democracy history of humanity is a struggle between the liberal and totalitarian types of democracy. This tension, since mid 18th Century, has always taken place in different types of regimes and has constituted an important chapter of modern history. Although sometimes got less important amongst other political practices at a global context, this tension has always occurred in regional and world relations. As Arendt discusses, in last half a century this struggle has been the core of today's world crisis. The relation between Political Islam and types of above mentioned two democracy types is about their perception of the interaction between the source of information and the society. Liberal democracy sees this process as a matter of trial and error, and gives a broad room to the personal and collective actions/endeavors beyond the politics. But, totalitarian democratic school recognizes a sole

and exclusive truth in politics which may be called as political messiahism. This approach seeks to drive the society towards a "perfect result" accepting no resistance and widens the scope of politics to embrace whole society. It perceives politics as the art of a divine and all-embracing philosophy reigning over all fields of life, either individual or societal.[11]

Here, we face the question of which path JDP as an Islamist Party will chose; a liberal democracy, or a messiahist totalitarian democracy? Will JDP be loyal to the dynamics of a liberal democratic transformation, a process that may take decades to grow strong roots of a civil society throughout Turkish society, or follow a totalitarian path in order to form a society under religious norms and codes? If JDP can prove reform and change by closing the gap between the secular state and a Muslim society, this will certainly be an extraordinary sample for other Muslim countries of the Middle East to follow. But unfortunately, the religious rhetoric used by the leading cadre of JDP in recent years promotes the idea that Islam religion and its moral values possess vast capability to transform the society into higher levels of democracy, economic welfare and societal prosperity. On the other hand, as argued by the theorists of political Islam, Al-Bannah and Mawdudi the basic tenets of Islam religion rests upon social equality and justice, which does not encompass all aspects of liberal economic understanding. In this sense, JDP needs to clarify its position and clean its artificial image amongst the domestic and international circles that is; heading west, but moving to East.

The referendum in 2010 over the amendment of some articles of the Constitutional Law has been a cornerstone for JDP. In this amendment package (23 articles) basically the structure of Constitutional Court and the composition of SBJP (Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors) has been changed. These amendments have pushed the legal authority to the control of "execution" and limited the "independent" character of judicial power in Turkey. Following the referendum, the government has in several legal cases proved its direct interference into the judicial/legal process in order to re-organize the judgment process according to the political will of the "execution" branch. Naturally, this interference demolishes the core principal pillar of a sound democracy based on separation of three powers, the judicial, legislative and executive. But JDP as a strong party in legislative and executive powers aims to create a subservient judiciary system. In Turkey currently, the parliament lacks a strong opposition party, and President Abdullah Gül receives strong critics for giving full support to the government acts, codes and policies while ignoring his role to act as a mediator amongst the political parties and constitutional institutions.

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[11] Arendt, H., 1958, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, World Publishing Co. Cleveland, p.1-3

For the future of JDP government, some scenarios are produced. Some of these scenarios are also detailed by Rabasa and Larrabee, in their study questioning the rise of Political Islam in Turkey. They foresee four possible scenarios in a sequence from the strongest to the weakest; a) JDP pursues a moderate and EU-oriented path, b) JDP pursues a more aggressive Islamist agenda, c) Judicial closing of the JDP and d) Military intervention.[12] Turkish and global public opinion desperately expects the first scenario to reign over the Turkish political agenda, but watches the domestic and regional developments also in apprehension due to the aggressive religious agenda of JDP. Any of the third and fourth scenarios will give huge harm to Turkish political life and cause a setback in some gains realized by JDP government in economic and socio-political areas. As Rabasa and Larrabee argues the JDP government should not miss the chance to prove that a party with Islamic roots can operate within the framework of a secular democratic system and Islam can be reconciled with modern secular democracy.

Neo-Ottomanism and Turkish-Syria Relations

The imperialistic age has faded away. The empires of British, French, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Ottoman and similar have completed their influence and the functions upon the societies and been replaced by nation-states in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In last century, the humanity has experienced two hot and one cold war not only sweeping away the empires and the imperialistic discourse but also totalitarian regimes. Now, in new millennia, the principles of a new understanding upon individual and society reign giving every community the right of self-determination, sovereignty and democracy under equal conditions with other developed countries. In new age, rather than under military pacts and groupings, the states and societies come together under collaborative supra-national entities for a safer and more prosperous future. In current era, no matter how genuine and positive intentions they inherit, the policies based on neo- or old- imperial teachings would encounter considerable reactions from any society or geographic region it is aiming to shape. A political agenda inheriting religion based norms and values will have shortcomings to fulfill the requirements of a modern democracy understanding.

Turkish independence war between 1919-1922 inherits an exceptional character. It has been accomplished against a economic and political order dictated by the colonial powers in the Middle East and has constituted a sample for other communities in the region and sparked

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[12] Rabasa, A., Larrabee, F. S., 2008, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, RAND Corporation Press, Pitsburg, pp.3-7

the idea of independence and national sovereignty. In this regard, Turkish independence war has been perceived as the beginning of post colonial age in the Middle East and gained respect amongst the communities and the statesmen fighting for independence. In recent years, the political discourse displayed by JDP upon the Middle Eastern states in a line parallel with US-EU coalition constitutes a dilemma. The "zero problems with neighbors" diplomacy has resulted in a kind of "more problems with neighbors" due to anti-rationalist initiatives of JDP politicians across the neighboring countries and also the Middle East. The neo-Ottomanist foreign policy of AKP has not fit the (neo)realist projections of US-EU coalition in the region. We should keep in mind that, the Islamo-political movements of last century in the Middle East has been founded upon anti-western ideologies and the similarity between Turkish and US-EU policies may result in an anti-Turkish public opinion in Arab Street.

Although Turkish-Syria relations has followed a stable line since the independence of Syria from French rule after WWII, three issues has dominated the relations between two countries. First is the joining of Hatay province to Turkey in a peaceful process during the independence period of Syria from France. Despite this peaceful union of Hatay province (ancient Antochia) with a referendum, Syria has insistently declared Hatay as its stolen piece of land by Turkey. The second problem between two countries is the water of Euphrates River. Syria accuses Turkey for building a serial of dams over Euphrates and not allowing enough water into Syria. And a third problem is the support given by Syrian government to PKK terrorists, and providing training camps to them particularly during the term of Hafez Esad, in 1990s. In 2000s, a gradual détente has come upon the relations between two countries following the expelling of PKK leader Ocalan from Syria and the death of Hafez Esad who have governed the country with an iron fist for years. But the positive winds between two countries in mid-2000s have turned into a tornado with the emergence of Arab spring.

In last one year, Prime Minister Erdoğan has consistently accused Syrian leader Bashir Esad for using non-democratic ways against the Syrian people and given open support to opposition groups in Syria and opened the border gates to the Syrians fleeing away from the government forces. In Hatay province two refugee camps have been established to shelter Syrian regime oppositions with a population over 30.000 refugees. During these developments, some border violations have taken place by Syrian army pursuing the opposition groups. The relations between two neighboring countries sharing a land border of 800 km.s have deteriorated in recent months. Last week, a Turkish military aircraft has been

shot down by Syrian air defense forces over international waters without applying any step of engagement rules. Although Syria has officially declared that this was done mistakenly, this has resulted a high tension involving EU and US condemnation. Since the foundation of Turkish Republic, first time a Turkish war plane has been shot down by another state.

This event is actually a result of Turkish Foreign policy shift in recent years. After the attack of Israeli Special Forces against a Turkish vessel carrying humanitarian materials to Palestinians in Gaza and killing 8 Turkish civilians, now a Muslim country has attacked Turkey by ignoring all steps of military engagement rules. Turkish statesmen should consider the danger created by the turmoil of a regime change in Syria. A neighbor in lack of authority with a land border over 800 kilometers can easily become a free heaven for not only the PKK terrorists but also for the groups to smuggle humans, arms, drugs, and other organized crime acts into Turkey. A possible conflict with Syria will naturally stand as an obstacle for EU membership of Turkey.

Current global order pushes not only the traditional great powers in the region such as USA, EU, Russia but also the newcomers i.e Japan and China to heavily involve in the regional political initiatives for the Middle East. The tri-pod policy of great western powers upon the Middle East pursuing a) seamless flow of energy sources (oil, natural gas) into global industry, b) security of Israel and c) prevent the emergence of any regional power in the Middle East has been consolidated in post cold-war era in a way that the economic global stabilization rests upon the above mentioned tri-pod policy. In this sense, global order does not hesitate to urge great powers to apply coercive power upon the ME in last two decades. Since the foundation of Israeli state in 1948, Egypt, Libya and Syria have been the forerunners of military coalitions against Israel in 1948, 1954, 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli conflicts. Removal of anti-Israeli regimes in these states with pro-American/West regimes will hamper the formation of such coalitions in the future and assure a gradual relief to Israel. After Libya, and Egypt now Syria faces the same treatment.

Conclusion

The World has entered a new age with the end of cold war. Middle East seems to stay under the effects of great power competition for the future as it was in 20th century. Although new power centers emerge over the globe such as Asia-Pacific the Middle East protects its preeminent position in global politics. With the withdrawal of ideology based Arab Socialism from the stage, Political Islam has swept to power not politically but with a broader agenda in individual and societal context. In this sense, political Islamist parties get stronger. After

Turkey, political Islamist parties in Tunisia, in Morocco, in Algeria, in Egypt, in Yemen and finally in Syria emerge as strong role players and fight to come to power. These parties are perceived to become the representatives of moderate Islamist democracy and get support from the West in order to pose a common posture against totalitarian regimes.

Recently, the West and Turkey run a campaign against Syria and Bashir Esad regime, and give support to the opposition groups and accuse Syria for conducting a war against its own citizens. It is clear that US-EU coalition is aiming to shape the Middle East according to their short-mid-long term objectives, and the role of Turkey in this process gets vital as time moves. The core point about the role of Turkey is whether she will be able to help the Middle Eastern countries to bridge the gap between democracy and political Islamist regimes. But, as discussed above, there is a theoretical question about the position of liberal and totalitarian democratic understandings in Middle Eastern societies. The success of Turkey in this sense, I mean its capability to embrace western liberal democracy will also clarify the path for newly born Islamist party regimes in the region. One strong argument supporting this argument is that religiously fundamentalist groups get democratized when they interact in a society with other groups or identities.

It is possible to claim that, contrary to the cold-war period, the West is not paying much attention to preserve the secular-democratic stance of Turkey. Parallel to the global power dynamics of 21st century coming days seem to prepare new duties and roles for Turkey. The increasing effect of political Islam fuelled by anti-western sentiments may force Turkey to question its position in Western Camp and urge to initiate new policies mainly looking for new chances in the Middle East and Central Asia geographies. Such a divergence in its western axis will surely effect its domestic and regional security.

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