Turkey and the Prospects for Religious Freedom in the Middle East

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**Summary**

The 20th century was a bad time for the freedom and safety of religious minorities in the Middle East, particularly Christians and Jews.

Over the past decade in the Republic of Turkey, however, liberalizing currents have emerged. They have affected all aspects of civil and political life, including religious freedom. Public religiosity, long discouraged (even suppressed) under the old Kemalist regime, is today openly displayed. While practicing Sunni Muslims have been the most obvious beneficiaries of this newfound religious tolerance, Christians and other faith minorities are beginning to see improvements, too.

These developments are promising because they spring, not from an alien ideology imposed from without, but from indigenous Turkish ideas and traditions with deep roots stretching back into the old Ottoman Empire. Their effects will likely be felt, not just in Turkey, but in the Middle East as a whole.

**Religious Freedom in the Middle East Today**

No country in the Islamic Middle East affords religious minorities the rights, liberties, and security taken for granted in the West.

The actual conditions vary from place to place. At the worst end of the scale is Saudi Arabia, which makes little pretense of religious freedom or human rights generally, either in theory or practice. While not as bad as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan often comes close, particularly in its rural areas. At the other end of the spectrum is Lebanon, where

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* The scope of this article deliberately excludes Israel, the only country in the Middle East without a Muslim majority. Religious freedom in Israel has its own dynamic and needs to be treated separately.
Christian political parties play a genuine and effective role in government, and Christian civil society, although beleaguered and dwindling, remains prominent. Other Middle Eastern states fall somewhere in between.

The general lack of freedom and respect for religious minorities in the Islamic Middle East is especially poignant in the case of Christianity and Judaism, religions that (along with Islam) comprise the world’s great monotheistic tradition, and whose very existence predates Islam by over 600 years, in the case of Christianity, and two millennia for Judaism.

Demographic data illustrate the story. Over the centuries, Muslim governments and societies have inexorably chipped away at Christian and Jewish populations in the Middle East. It is difficult to imagine, but at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (A.D. 570-632), the Middle East heartland – modern Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa – was Christian. Today the Middle East’s Christian remnant is tiny and shrinking. The countries with the most Christians today are Egypt (something over 8 million, about 10% of the total population), Syria (2.3 million, 19% of the total), and Lebanon (1.6 million, 39% of the total). There are some Christians in the Gulf states, mostly guest workers. Jordan has about 390,000 Christians. Iraq has less than one million. In Iran, the Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is together stand at only 1.5 million, and in Turkey there are less than 200,000 Christians in an overall population of 79 million.

In 2011, the outlook for Christians deteriorated markedly in several important countries.

- The number of Christians in Iraq continued to fall, as they fled post-Saddam persecution and violence. In a BBC interview this past June, Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, characterized the extreme violence against Christians in Iraq (and elsewhere in the Middle East) as “ethnic cleansing.”
- Since the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in February, violence against Egypt’s Coptic Christians has escalated, with the authorities often seemingly unable or willing to stop it. The strong showing of the Muslim Brotherhood-controlled Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt’s November elections has only heightened Coptic concerns.
In Syria, where Christians and other minorities have typically fared relatively well under decades of Ba’ath Party rule, the growing popular agitation against the government of Bashir al-Assad is viewed with trepidation.16,17 If Assad is deposed, will a new government allow Muslim mobs to vent their rage against the lives and property of religious minorities, as has happened to the Chaldean Christians in Iraq?

Even where the violence itself is relatively contained, rapid Christian depopulation is no less troubling. In the same BBC interview cited above, the Archbishop of Canterbury pointed to Palestine as an example. “I think there are still perhaps too few people in this country [the UK] who are aware of the hemorrhaging of Christian populations from the Holy Land,” Williams said. “The fact that Bethlehem, a majority Christian city just a couple of decades ago, is now very definitely a place where Christians are a marginalized minority.”18

As for Jews in the Middle East, their numbers outside Israel are tiny compared to what they were before the founding of the Jewish state. Where Jewish communities exist at all – Turkey, Iran, Syria and a few others – populations are in the tens of thousands.

Cautious Optimism

It’s easy to look at this and simply give up. Indeed, pessimism may be the most realistic attitude when it comes to the future of religious freedom in the Middle East – but it is not the only attitude.

There are glimmers of hope scattered across the region, and nowhere do they shine with more promise than in the Republic of Turkey.

Unlike other countries in the modern Middle East, Turkey is heir to a long, indigenous tradition of tolerant, pragmatic and even liberal rule and social policy – i.e., the Ottoman Empire. While by no means idyllic, life for religious minorities under the Ottomans was good, especially when compared to conditions in the West during the same period.

Drawing on the relatively humane (and long dormant) traditions of the Ottoman Empire, 21st century Turkey has embarked on a rebirth of religion in public life. While it is too early to draw conclusions, there are indications that the rights and interests
Christians and other minorities are being seriously included, both in theory and practice. Moreover, the Turkish government appears to be cautiously promoting this new policy set – i.e., a moderate, religion-friendly secularism – as a model for the greater Middle East.

What makes the hope for a new religious freedom plausible in Turkey, is that it is arising within a larger renaissance of Ottoman Turkish principles and practices. This is not ‘imported liberalism,’ not an effort by the West to bring ‘democracy’ to a traditionally non-democratic society. Instead, what we may be seeing in Turkey today is a rediscovery of indigenous liberalism, bringing with it a return to an older and more civilized respect for Jews and Christians, ‘People of the Book.’

There is no guarantee these encouraging trends will come to fruition, but they are certainly worth exploring.

The Ottoman Legacy

The Ottoman Empire started as one of many small beyliks (principalities) that emerged in Anatolia as a result of Turkish migration from Central Asia. Under Osman I (1259–1326), it expanded rapidly as the Seljuk and Byzantine Empires crumbled in the wake of Mongol invasions.¹⁹ By the mid-15th century, the Osmanlis (Anglicized as ‘Ottomans’) were the supreme power on earth, with an empire that stretched from North Africa to Central Europe, from the Persian Gulf to the steppes of Russia. While the empire evolved considerably over a lifespan of more than six centuries, four broad features – geopolitics, religion, ethnic interests, and political economy – stand out as especially significant. Each is of crucial relevance to the question of religious freedom, and human rights generally, in Turkey today.

Geopolitics

The Ottoman Empire was a global colossus at its height, and even in decline it was considered a great power. Its unique intercontinental geography made it a pivot between Europe and Asia, a cultural bridge between the Christian and Islamic worlds.

Religion

Following the capture of Mecca and Medina by Selim I (1512-1520), Ottoman sultans assumed the title of Caliph, head of worldwide Sunni Islam. The Ottomans were
uniquely religious among Islamic rulers. They made “what was perhaps the only serious attempt, in a Muslim state of high cultural civilization, to establish the Holy Law of Islam as the effective law of the land,” writes Bernard Lewis.

However, the Ottomans were not ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ by any stretch. The empire organized its non-Muslim subjects (e.g., Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian Orthodox) into autonomous millets (nations), each governed by its own religious laws – an enlightened and tolerant policy by the standards of the time, and even by those of today.

And the religious minorities were by no means relegated to ‘outsider’ status. They were an integral, respected, and thriving part of the Ottoman system, albeit as second-class citizens. For example,

- The Greek Orthodox Patriarch held a high position in the Ottoman governmental administration, with the rank of three horse tails – the Sultan himself only had six. The Patriarch was given not only religious authority over his Orthodox flock, but civil and secular power, too.

- The autonomy given the Jewish millet was remarkable. The Jews prospered immensely, and soon Jews from Christian lands – e.g., Spain, Poland, Austria, Bohemia – flooded into the Ottoman Empire in search of freedom and a good life.

During the nineteenth century, the Ottomans introduced a range of secular political and civil reforms, which also benefited the religious minorities. They even sent troops to put down the fanatical Wahhabi sect in Arabia – perhaps the most effective attempt to crush radical Islam in history.

**Ethnic Interests**

The Ottoman Empire was ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. Ottoman Turkish (i.e., Turkish with lots of Arabic and Farsi words thrown in, written in Arabic script) was the official administrative language, but many indigenous languages flourished. In fact, one of the major factors leading to the downfall of the empire was the growth of European-inspired ethnic nationalist awakenings, first among the varied non-Turkish Christian peoples of the Balkans, then amongst the Turks themselves. Kurdish
nationalism in Turkey emerged around the same time, as the Ottoman Empire and its protections for minorities were weakening.

It is important to bear in mind that the worst stain on the Ottoman record of multiculturalism and religious tolerance, the 1915 mass murder of the Armenians, came after the 1908 Young Turk revolution. As such, the tragedy “was not a product of the Ottoman system,” as Mustafa Akyol points out, but rather “a product of the demise of the Ottoman system.”

To this day, the Turkish government and most of its citizens vociferously object to any use of the word genocide to describe the destruction of Anatolian Armenia during World War I. While this attitude will remain the majority view in Turkey for the foreseeable future, perhaps indefinitely, notable dissenters have started to arise. For example, Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, winner of the Noble Prize for literature in 2006, has publicly criticized the Turkish government for claiming “the slaughter [of Armenians in 1915] does not count as a genocide.” And over the past few years, Turkish historian Taner Akçam has patiently documented the case that the Armenians were, indeed, the victims of genocide. For his remarks, Pamuk was charged in an İstanbul court with “publicly denigrat[ing] Turkish identity,” though the case was later dropped. As for Akçam, he lives in the United States and teaches at the University of Minnesota, far from the reach of Turkish prosecutors.

**Political Economy**

“The Ottoman hand rested lightly on its subject populations,” writes historian Donald Quataert. Geography necessitated that power be decentralized and the sultans exhibited a relatively laissez-faire approach to commerce. Indeed, what we would today call ‘free enterprise’ was a hallmark of the Ottoman system.

- Beginning in 1536, they granted special privileges to Europeans, the so-called Capitulations. The Capitulations allowed Europeans to conduct business and trade in Ottoman territories under the laws of their home countries, thus promoting free trade and vigorous economic exchange.
- Christian and Jewish minorities were encouraged to conduct and manage trade with the European powers.
• The promotion of private enterprise accelerated with the Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876).

The Kemalist Interlude

Although it lasted 600 years – no small feat by any historical yardstick – the Ottoman Empire was not immortal. Ottoman Turkey, along with its flawed but nonetheless relatively enlightened policies, died in the flames of World War I.

The 1918 defeat of the Ottoman Empire led to the Turkish war of independence against occupying European forces. The Turkish leader was Mustafa Kemal, a war hero and charismatic visionary. Kemal, who later took the surname Atatürk (‘father of the Turks’), founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and led the country until his death fifteen years later. Even today, his memory inspires respect and loyalty like no other figure in modern times.30

Atatürk saw the Ottoman Empire as backward and deserving of extinction, an ancient anchor dragging the Turks down and preventing them from joining the ranks of modern nations. In his view, all things Ottoman had to be left behind in pursuit of Western-style economic, social, and political modernization. His thoughts on government and society came to be known as Kemalism, a philosophy that systematically repudiated Turkey’s Ottoman past.

This point is key to our discussion. Up until the early years of the 21st century, modern Turkey was explicitly dedicated to the suppression of all things Ottoman.

Geopolitics

Outside of minor disputes with Iraq and Syria that were resolved de facto early on, Atatürk disavowed any interest in territory beyond Turkey’s 1923 borders. It is not difficult to understand why. The final 100 years of the Ottoman Empire were horrific for the Turks. From the beginning of the Greek war of independence in 1821 to the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, 5.1 million Ottoman Muslims — mostly Turkish civilians — were killed in the wars fought to carve up the dying Ottoman Empire.31

The foreign policy of the new republic was largely driven by security considerations.32 Facing a powerful Soviet threat on its northern and eastern borders, Turkey joined NATO and aligned itself closely with the United States. With few
exceptions, its other foreign relationships were subordinated to this (junior) partnership. In 1996, Turkey signed a military cooperation accord with Israel, at the cost of further damaging Ankara’s already poor relations with most of the Arab world.33

**Religion**

Atatürk believed Islam was reactionary and hindered public policy and civic life. He abolished the Caliphate and mandated a rigid brand of secularism (*laiklik*) that “involved not just separation of the state from the institutions of Islam,” notes Stanford Shaw, “but also liberation of the individual mind from the restraints imposed by the traditional Islamic concepts and practices.”34

Atatürk decreed that Turkish henceforth be written in the Latin alphabet, rather than the Arabic script of the Quran. He set Sunday as the country’s official of rest, deliberately pushing aside the special place Friday holds in most Islamic countries. Clothing reminiscent of Turkey’s Islamic or Ottoman heritage (e.g., the fez) was prohibited, a restriction that survives today in the controversial ban of headscarves in public schools and universities. The capital was moved from İstanbul to Ankara to further secure the secular foundations of the Republic.

In practice, Kemalism meant not so much the separation of religion and state, as state control of public religious expression. Mosques and other Islamic institutions were placed under direct government supervision.

**Ethnic Interests**

Atatürk believed that ethnic and linguistic diversity had weakened the Ottoman state and left it defenseless against ravenous enemies. In keeping with the prevailing European political models, he imagined Turkey as a unitary republic, with no communal solidarities standing between the state and the people. All citizens of the new state were regarded as Turks, theoretically sharing the same language, culture, and national destiny. This included the (decidedly non-Turkish) Kurds, who comprise roughly one fifth of Turkey’s population today. The Kemalists set about making this fiction a reality by ruthlessly suppressing all expressions of Kurdish national identity and language. At the
same time, Atatürk exhibited little interest in Turkish minorities who fell outside of the republic’s boundaries – he was not a pan-Turkist.†

**Political Economy**

One of the fundamental Kemalist principles was statism (*Devletçilik*), the belief that industrial and technological development required heavy government involvement. The Kemalists were not socialists, but they did believe in a command economy and development from above.

The Kemalists also believed that the state must act as the ultimate guardian of the revolution against reactionary influences and the transitory fluctuations of electoral politics. To this day, unelected Turkish military and judicial institutions exercise considerable influence over elected leaders, mostly behind the scenes. This hidden hand is sometimes called the ‘deep state.’

### The ‘Ottoman’ Reemergence in the 21st Century

For all of its impressive achievements, Kemalism failed to bring about the kind of modernization envisioned by Atatürk. Essentially, the Kemalists were struggling against the natural proclivities of the people they ruled, notably (though by no means exclusively) in the domain of religion.

- The Turkish people have become more religiously observant in recent decades, much to the consternation Atatürk’s rabidly ‘secularist’ (sometimes even atheist) acolytes. According to a 2002 Gallup poll, 78% of Turks believe a “religious and spiritual life” is either essential or very important, and over a quarter rank religion as the most important thing in life (ahead of family, country and self).

- Far from bringing about the assimilation of Kurds, the Turkish Republic has been embroiled for the past quarter century in a costly civil war, to the tune of 35,000 dead and $120 billion in military expenditures from 1984 to 1999 alone.

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† Pan-Turkism (sometimes called Pan-Turanism) was the belief that all ethnic/linguistic Turks — from Turkey, across central Asia and into China — should unite, in some fashion or another. It was a popular ideology among Turkish nationalists through WWI, but enjoyed little following in the Republic. We saw a mild (and short-lived) version of pan-Turkism in the immediate aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union, when some Turks saw the newly liberated Turkic republics (Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, etc) as natural allies of Turkey in the post-Cold War world.
State domination of the economy failed to catapult Turkey into the ranks of the industrialized West, while the military interventions and civil rights restrictions needed to preserve Kemalism compromised Turkey’s aspirations to enter the European Union (EU).

The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism

In the 1980s, a new intellectual climate began to arise in Turkey. Ideas dormant since Ottoman times began bubbling to the surface. Sometimes called *neo-Ottomanism*, this loose cluster of social and political phenomena are less a revival of ‘Ottomanism’ than repudiation of Kemalism. Because the label can have pejorative connotations when used by non-Turks in former Ottoman domains (see the Greek Cypriot media for an extreme case), it is rarely used by those who hold the views it describes.

Liberal Turkish journalists coined the term in the 1990s to describe (favorably) the ideas and policies of Turgut Özal, the late Turkish Prime Minister (1983-1989) and President (1989-1993). As prime minister, Özal engineered Turkey’s transition from a state-dominated import substitution economy to a more *laissez-faire*, export-driven one. In order to gain markets for Turkish exports, he strengthened bilateral and multilateral ties with neighboring countries. As president, he launched a sustained and expensive campaign to attract the mostly Turkic, energy-rich former Soviet republics of Central Asia into Turkey’s sphere of influence, though his efforts proved insufficient to draw them away from the Russian orbit. In seeking to bolster ties with Turkey’s Muslim neighbors, Özal espoused a less Kemalist view of secularism (he was the first sitting president to make the Hajj to Mecca) and a more tolerant stance toward the Kurds. His outreach remained in keeping with Turkey’s alliance with Washington, being designed in part to enhance its strategic importance to the United States in the post-Cold War world.

The death of Özal in 1993 led to a period of intense polarization and political instability in Turkey, a ‘lost decade’ that saw nine different coalition governments and an escalation of the Kurdish insurgency.

‡ Actually, there were earlier precursors, going back to the 1950s and even further. These were politically stillborn, however, and can be safely ignored for this analysis.

It was during this time that an important, and troubling, political figure gained ground in Turkey, Necmettin Erbakan and his Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi). In contrast to Özal, Erbakan opposed Turkey’s bid to join the EU and called instead for a pan-Islamic alliance in the Middle East. Although moderate when compared to some Islamist movements, he was a hardliner by Turkish standards.

Erbakan and Özal represent the main two currents in Turkey’s Islam-in-the-public-square stream. Fortunately, the growing political prominence of religion in 21st century Turkey owes more to the Özal wing than to Erbakan. After serving as prime minister of a fragile coalition government from 1996 to 1997, Erbakan was ousted by the military.

The Nature of Neo-Ottomanism

The rise of neo-Ottomanism at the turn of the 21st century reflected a union of sorts between secular liberals, who were disillusioned with the Kemalist excesses of the past, and moderate political Muslims who broke away from Erbakan to form the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). The AKP explicitly eschews Islamism and is very much in the liberal Özal tradition.

Again returning to our four-fold schema of Turkish national imperatives, here is roughly where neo-Ottomanism stands.

Geopolitics

In the geopolitical realm, the dominant figure is Ahmet Davutoğlu, a Turkish political scientist whose seminal work was the 2001 book Stratejik Derinlik (Strategic Depth). Davutoğlu’s ideas were embraced by AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who became prime minister following the party’s 2002 parliamentary victory. Davutoğlu was Erdoğan’s foreign policy advisor and is now foreign minister.

Although Davutoğlu and other officials of the Erdoğan government disavow the ‘neo-Ottoman’ label, effusive references to Turkey’s Ottoman heritage are ubiquitous in their speeches and statements. “A new, positive role for Turkey in the world requires a reconciliation with its own past, the overcoming of societal taboos and a positive new concept of Turkish identity,” said Cüneyt Zapsu, a senior advisor to Erdoğan. “We are the Ottomans' successors and should not be ashamed of this.”
Davutoğlu argues that Turkey has underachieved in foreign policy because of its failure to take advantage of two innate strategic endowments – its geographic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Middle East, and its deep historical and cultural ties to the vast former Ottoman domain stretching across three continents. Rather than leveraging the ‘strategic depth’ afforded by these comparative advantages, the Kemalist state turned away from Turkey’s own neighborhood in favor of being a subordinate partner of Washington. Turkey must “no longer [be] a sole alliance nation,” writes Davutoğlu.45

Whereas the old Islamist Welfare Party’s foreign policy derived from undeniably Muslim-centric, anti-Western premises (e.g., deep mistrust of Europe and the United States, solidarity with other majority Muslim states), the moderate, Ottoman-flavored policies of Davutoğlu and the AKP are rooted in a secular strategic logic based on the downplaying of military concerns, coupled with the search for markets. For example, Erbakan opposed Turkey’s bid for EU membership, but the neo-Ottomans of the AKP have strongly supported it.

**Religion**

The neo-Ottomans are tolerant toward religious expression and practice, unlike the Kemalists who tried to banish religion from public life. Neo-Ottomanism advocates a version of ‘secularism’ that prohibits legislation based on religious beliefs, while at the same timing maintaining that religion itself has a positive role to play in the public square.

If this sounds a bit like how secularism works in the United States, it’s no coincidence. The neo-Ottomans often cite America as a model for reconciling religion with modernity. For instance, Turgut Özal’s brother, Korkut, thought Utah and the Mormons were worthy exemplars. “My conversion, as it were,” said Korkut Özal, “came when I went to America. We learned that religion and progress could go together.”46

**Ethnic Interests**

Neo-Ottomanism embraces a more inclusive national identity that deemphasizes Turkish ethnicity. An indication of how much the government’s approach has changed came during the run-up to Turkey’s March 2009 local elections, when Prime Minister Erdoğan recorded a welcome message in Kurdish for a new Kurdish-language television
station, an unthinkable offense just a few years before. Even the Turkish military, long a bastion of Kemalist ideology, seems to have accepted the paradigm shift. In an April 2009 speech, Turkish Chief of the General Staff, General İlker Başbuğ, spoke of the “people of Turkey” (Turkiye halkı) rather than the “Turkish people” (Turk halkı) or “Turkish nation” (Turk milleti) – a notable shift.47

State-sanctioned multiculturalism is seen both as essential to solving Turkey’s internal problems and a necessary component of projecting soft power abroad. The AKP’s more conciliatory stance toward Kurds at home bolsters Turkey’s qualifications for EU membership and facilitates its lucrative economic links to the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq. And the AKP government’s 2009 move to normalize relations with Christian Armenia48 required that Erdoğan adopt a less ethnic/religious approach to Armenia’s rival, the Turkic and Muslim Azerbaijan.**

**Political Economy**

In contrast to the statist economic policies of the Kemalists, neo-Ottomanism embraces free market reforms and integration into the global economy. The AKP rejects the idea that the state should be the main driver of job creation – “Don't ask for a job,” became a standard line in Erdoğan’s speeches.49 Due in large part to AKP’s structural reforms, Turkey has experienced a period of robust economic growth, averaging 6.8% from 2002 to 2007.50 Foreign direct investment surged from $1.1 billion in 2001 to a whopping $22 billion in 2007.51

This support for private enterprise plays well to the new entrepreneurial class in Turkey’s small-to-midsized cities. These are people who once supported Turgut Özal and today are the core constituency of the AKP. These so-called ‘Anatolian Tigers’ are socially conservative, religious, and hardworking capitalists who benefited from the decline of state-supported industrial conglomerates of the old Kemalist era. Although pious Muslims, in many ways they have more in common with Indiana Presbyterians than with the Muslim Brotherhood. One prominent think tank calls them ‘Islamic Calvinists.’52

**A Place for Christians and Jews?**

** The attempt to establish diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey have since hit a snag and are currently on ice.
It is here in the liberalizing mix of neo-Ottoman ideas – under the religion category, certainly, but also with respect to ethnic interests and political economy – that the hope for a better life for Christians, Jews and other religious minorities finds support. As the heavy boot of the Kemalist state is lifted from the backs of Muslims, a similar freedom may be emerging for the religious minorities, too, driven by the same logic and social/political dynamics.

We shall return to this most central question. First, however, we need to look at why some critics fear neo-Ottomanism is not as liberal and benevolent as it might appear.

The Critics of Neo-Ottomanism

The memory of Ottoman times clearly resonates with today’s Turkish public. A revival of interest in the Ottoman legacy is sweeping the country, evident in everything from contemporary film and literature to skyrocketing sales of Ottoman era antiques and memorabilia. The popular film comedy *Ottoman Republic* imagines a modern day alternate reality in which the empire never fell.53

“Ottomania is in full swing with the Turkish elite, reflecting the determined revival of a culture long denied and discredited by the [Kemalist] Turkish Republic,” notes journalist Suat Kiniklioglu.54 Nostalgia about Turkey’s Ottoman past naturally lends itself to neo-Ottoman visions of the future.

However, critics of the AKP claim its ‘neo-Ottoman’ rhetoric is tactical and disingenuous, designed to mask crypto-Islamist goals in an idiom that appeals to the Turkish people and avoids ideological red lines likely to provoke military intervention. While these accusations are often made by staunch Kemalists who have reason to find fault in Erdoğan wherever possible, their concerns are not without substance. And if true, they could have grave implications for religious minorities and human rights in general.

These concerns typically focus on foreign policy, where critics believe the AKP’s Islamist agenda is most easily discerned. If Turkey is turning its back on the West in order to align itself with odious Muslim regimes, critics ask, can abuse (or at least malign neglect) of Turkish Christians and other religious minorities be far behind?

“The AKP’s foreign policy is not neo-Ottoman,” wrote Soner Çağaptay, because it is “asymmetrically focused” on improving relations with the Arab world and Iran at the
expense of the West and Israel, and with hardline anti-Western regimes at the expense of the moderate pro-Western governments. According to Çağaptay, Erdoğan pursues the same Islamist goals as Erbakan, only under a different banner.

Without a doubt, Erdoğan’s Turkey has experienced a remarkable improvement in diplomatic and economic relations with most of the Islamic world, including unsavory regimes and groups it once shunned. In 2004, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad made the first ever visit to Turkey by a Syrian head of state. Hamas leader Khaled Meshal came in 2006. In 2008, Erdoğan not only played host to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but also agreed to let him skip a longstanding diplomatic custom normally expected of visiting dignitaries — laying a wreath at Atatürk’s tomb. Sudanese president Omar Hassan al-Bashir visited Turkey twice before being indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court and was scheduled to make a return visit before Erdoğan called it off at the last minute.

In contrast, there have been palpable strains in Turkey’s relations with Western governments. In 2003, Ankara refused to permit US-led coalition forces to attack Iraq from Turkish territory. Ankara’s openings to Damascus in 2004-2005 were seen as undermining American and French efforts to bring about Syrian disengagement from Lebanon, while its engagement with Iran in recent months has been regarded in Washington and Europe as unhelpful to international efforts to stop Tehran’s uranium enrichment activity. During his October 2009 visit to Tehran, Erdoğan accused the West of holding Iran to a double standard regarding its nuclear program: “Those who are chanting for global nuclear disarmament should first start with their own countries.”

Turkish relations with Israel have been even more stressed, particularly since its 2008 military campaign in Gaza. In January 2009, Erdoğan sharply rebuked Israeli President Shimon Peres at a televised meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, telling him, “you know well how to kill,” before melodramatically storming out of the room. In October 2009, Turkey pulled out of a joint military exercise with Israeli troops.

However, this ‘asymmetry’ in Turkish diplomatic relations is largely consistent with the secular logic of neo-Ottomanism, particularly as Turkey outgrows its old military/security relationships and pursues its new (and lucrative) market-oriented foreign
policy. Turkish exports to the Middle East and North Africa have increased nearly sevenfold over the past eight years, while its trade with EU countries slipped to under 50% of its total trade volume for the first time last year. Though most Middle Eastern regimes are odious and some are anti-American, Turkey must be on good terms with all and sundry if it is to take full advantage of economic opportunities in the region. Straightforward national interest seems to explain most of Turkey’s recent foreign policy under the AKP, with little need to appeal to Islamism, covert or otherwise.

The cooling of ties between Ankara and the West owes much to European stonewalling on Turkey’s admission to the EU. This rejectionist attitude, largely based on cultural grounds, has contributed to a steady drop in Turkish public support for membership in the illustrious club. No country will accept that kind of treatment if it has options, and Turkey definitely has options. In 2009, Turkey reciprocally abolished visa requirements with Syria and Libya, an arrangement that Europe long refused.

“You wonder why Turkey is curious about different avenues? Look at your own behavior and attitude, Europe,” said Rep. Robert Wexler, who chaired a congressional subcommittee on Europe.

Davutoğlu and others have argued that engagement with rogue regimes bolsters Turkey’s leverage with the West. The fact that these governments are nasty is precisely what makes Turkey’s ability to intercede so valuable. No one needs Turkish mediation with Jordan, after all. “Turkey cannot demand EU membership from a position of waiting outside the door,” said Davutoğlu.

As for the strain in relations with Israel, to some degree it is an inevitable outgrowth of the diminishing importance of the military/security side of Turkish foreign policy. The benefits of partnering with the region’s most powerful military just are not as important to Ankara as they once were, and Israel is not among its top ten trading partners. Given the greater potential value of Arab markets, Turkey cannot afford to brand itself as pro-Israel, particularly in the wake of the 2008 Gaza war that left more than 1,400 Palestinians dead and the peace process in tatters. And while Erdoğan’s popularity on the Arab street does not necessarily translate into gains at the intergovernmental level (one Turkish commentator calls it “an asset that can be enjoyed,
but not spent”), it has probably contributed to the recent upswing in Arab tourism and the growing appeal of Turkish television programs in the region.

Insofar as Islamic solidarities play a role in Turkish decision-making, it is in the mundane calculations of political mobilization in a democratic system. Erdoğan must maintain support at the ballot box from an electorate that is religiously observant and unsympathetic toward Israel. He cannot totally disregard these sentiments, particularly with others competing for the same core constituency.

The important question is not whether the AKP is pursuing a secret Islamist agenda – that seems unlikely – but whether domestic political posturing is driving the formulation of policy. This may happen at the margins (Erdoğan’s theatrics at Davos did come just weeks before local elections), but one would be hard pressed to find a clear-cut case of political considerations trumping the strategic logic of neo-Ottomanism. To return to the case of Turkish/Armenian relations, Turkey’s 2009 exploration of diplomatic ties to Christian Armenia came at the expense of angering Muslim Azerbaijan. And for all of Erdoğan’s angry rhetoric, Turkish relations with Israel remain friendlier than most of his constituents would like.

In short, those aspects of AKP foreign policy that some Western critics worry are indicative of a hidden Islamist agenda can, for the most part, be explained by the fact that they translate into the hard cash of national advantage. In the past seven years, Turkey’s diplomatic influence has grown substantially. Its export-fueled economy has more than doubled in size to become the world’s 17th largest. When the Erdoğan government talks of “rais[ing] Turkey to a position of global power” over the next two decades, no one snickers. Six former Turkish foreign ministers, some of them staunch Kemalists, recently gave Davutoğlu an eight-out-of-ten for his performance in office.

The biggest concern that most Turks have about their government’s policies is that they might permanently harm ties with the West. As recently as 2009, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs Philip Gordon said there were “more points of disagreement than of agreement” between Washington and Ankara.

However, while European and American officials have some legitimate concerns about Turkish behavior, in the final analysis most agree that Turkey’s intercontinental geography, expansive historical ties, democratic political system, vibrant economy, and
relatively free civil society make it a valuable asset for the West. With the rise of Iranian ambitions and capabilities in recent years, Turkey’s role as a regional counterweight has become all the more obvious.

The modern Turkish state faces challenges the old, 20th century paradigm can no longer address. Growing popular demands and expectations for greater democracy, cultural freedom, respect for popular piety, and economic liberalization and foreign trade are manifestly better addressed by the neo-Ottoman model than the Kemalist one. And there is every reason to expect this advantage will continue to be rewarded by the voters.

The neo-Ottoman vision reflects the concerns and aspirations of a wide swath of the Turkish public, from religious believers, to the conservative business classes, to the liberal intellectuals of Istanbul. Whatever the ultimate fate of the AKP, and however long the popular wave of Ottoman-chic may last, neo-Ottomanism is here to stay.

Religious Freedom in Turkey

Neo-Ottoman ideas and attitudes are not foreign transplants in Turkey. Their roots are deep in history and they naturally resonate with Turkish culture, political traditions, and national character. After decades of quiescence under the Kemalist experiment, they are asserting themselves.

It is within the larger context of neo-Ottoman liberalization (described above) that the possibility of greater religious freedom and security for Turkey’s religious minorities, Christians and Jews included, becomes plausible. And there are signs this may be taking place – halting and uncertain, to be sure, but nonetheless real. Şebnem Arsu, a correspondent for The New York Times specializing in Turkish affairs, seems largely correct: “In contrast with its staunchly secular predecessors, the Islam-inspired government of Mr. Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party, known as AKP, has been more sympathetic and attentive to Turkey’s non-Muslims, including Jews and Christians.”

Here are a few examples.

- In August 2011, the Turkish government announced it is returning properties (e.g., hospitals, orphanages, cemeteries) confiscated from religious minorities by the secular Kemalist government in 1936. There are hundreds of these properties.
In cases where the property is no longer available, restitution will be paid. In a statement announcing the decision, Erdoğan said, “Like everyone else, we also do know about the injustices that different religious groups have been subjected to because of their differences. Times that a citizen of ours would be oppressed due to his religion, ethnic origin, or different way of life are over.” And there is another component worth noting. The return of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish properties also involves a return of genuine decision-making authority to minority community leaders (e.g., the Patriarchs) over the foundations and other properties owned by their religious communities. The parallels with the old Ottoman millet system are striking.††

- The 12 June 2011 general elections saw an enthusiastic and relatively‡‡ heavy participation by Christians and other minorities. This growing involvement in political life by religious minorities is illustrated by the recent appointment of an Armenian to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the first in the history of the Turkish Republic. And out of the 12 June polling came the election of Erol Dora, the first Christian (Syrian Orthodox) elected to parliament in the history of the Republic. Obviously, it was an overwhelmingly Muslim constituency that elected Dora.

- Over the past decade, Muslim-to-Christian conversations in eastern Turkey have increased. These involve both the Armenian and Syrian Orthodox. In a typical case, individuals and families living as Muslims (e.g., having ‘Muslim’ on their ID cards), but whose forebears were Christian, are being baptized into their ancestral Christian faith. These baptisms are held quietly and privately, in deference to the traditional Muslim hostility toward apostasy, but they are

†† For background on the millet system, see Religion in the section The Ottoman Legacy above.
‡‡ The word ‘relatively’ is important, as there are few Christians and Jews living in Turkey anymore, the tragic result of early 20th century carnage and subsequent emigrations. Today there are only about 60,000 Armenian Orthodox, 23,000 Jews, 20,000 Syrian Orthodox, 3,600 Jehovah’s Witnesses; 3,500 Protestants of one type or another, 3,000 Chaldean Catholics, 2,500 Greek Orthodox. See Turkey: International Religious Freedom Report 2010, U.S. Department of State, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148991.htm.
occurring and everyone knows it. There is no effort by the state to curtail the baptisms.

- In August 2011, the government allowed the Greek Orthodox Patriarch to hold Divine Liturgy at the ancient Black Sea monastery of Sümela, a practice banned during the Kemalist decades. This was the second time Divine Liturgy was celebrated at the monastery in as many years.

- Christian structures are starting to be repaired here and there around Turkey, with St. Giragos Armenian Apostolic Church in Diyarbakır a notable example. The St. Giragos restoration cost $3.5 million, 70% being paid by the municipality of Diyarbakır and 30% by private donation, mostly Armenians in İstanbul and abroad. On 23 October 2011, Mass was held at St. Giragos for the first time since the First World War.

Political liberalization does not necessarily translate into social harmony, however, at least not in every instance. There are undeniably cases of intolerance, and even violence, directed against Christians and other religious minorities in Turkey today. A famous Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink, was murdered on the streets of İstanbul in 2007. The head of the Catholic Church in Turkey, Bishop Luigi Padovese, was stabbed to death by his Turkish driver in 2010. The driver, acting alone by all accounts, was evidently inspired by Islamist hatred. Three Christian workers at a Bible publishing house in Malatya were tortured and murdered in 2007, and there are indications local authorities were complicit. Although deplorable, such isolated incidents are probably inevitable in a country of 78 million people. Mercifully, Turkey does not suffer from the intercommunal violence that one sees in Lebanon, Iraq, or increasingly in Egypt. The only partial exception to that is Kurdish-related violence in southeastern Turkey, but even that is more insurgency than actual intercommunal strife.

Implications for the Middle East as a Whole

Finally, there are the tentative steps the AKP government is taking to export the neo-Ottoman model of religious freedom to other countries in the Middle East.

In September 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan embarked on an ‘Arab Spring’ tour of the region. In both Egypt and Tunisia, Erdoğan – an extremely popular figure
throughout the Middle East – called repeatedly for the establishment of secular regimes in the region, much to the consternation of the many conventional Islamists.90

Perhaps most importantly, Erdoğan drew an insightful distinction between the roles of the individual and the state in a properly constructed secular regime.

“A person is not secular,” Erdoğan said, “the state is secular.” The government must keep “an equal distance to [sic] all religious groups, including Muslim, Christian, Jewish and atheist people,” but individuals should be free to bring their faith with them into the public square. Very much in the Turgut Özal mold, Erdoğan offered himself as an example of a Muslim person successfully running a secular and democratic state. “You can do the same here,” he said.91

**A Hope Grounded in History**

And why might the Turks be effective in this? What reason do we have to think Ankara might actually be successful in an effort to encourage religious tolerance, and even moderate secularism, elsewhere in the Middle East?

As with the other aspects of the neo-Ottoman project, the promise springs from the history behind it.

For over half a millennium, the Turks strongly influenced their neighbors to the south, both directly and indirectly. More than any other power – more than the Arabs, more than Persians – the Turks historically have shaped and led the Islamic Middle East. The emergence of Turkey as the dominant regional power in the 21st century is, in many ways, a natural return to patterns that were jarringly interrupted by the geopolitical upheavals of the past 100 years, i.e., the two World Wars and the Cold War that followed.

In his seminal book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Harvard professor Samuel Huntington saw clearly the potential for a resurgence of Turkey’s regional influence in the post-Cold War world. Huntington recognized that “Turkey has the history, population, middle level of economic development, national coherence, and military tradition and competence to be the core state of Islam,”92 i.e., the “most powerful and culturally central state”93 in the Islamic geopolitical system, and certainly within Islam’s Middle Eastern heartland.
Eighteen years after *The Clash of Civilizations*, Robert W. Merry, editor of *The National Interest*, took up Huntington’s argument.94

In a November 2011 essay, Merry correctly pointed out that, while “[t]he Ottomans, of course, were the core of Islam for centuries prior to World War I,” their Turkish Republican successors suffered a definite geopolitical demotion in the 20th century.95

“But the Cold War is over,” Merry wrote, “and Turkey is playing a role now much more in keeping with its true heritage… Turkey should be encouraged to develop its role as Islamic interlocutor, perhaps even as something of a core state for Islam. It can help guide the Middle East through its current travails and struggles far better than the United States can.”96

The historical currents, practices, and patterns to which Huntington and Merry allude, and which we have explored in some detail in this article, are tenacious. Like other historical phenomena, they tend to repeat themselves over centuries – not in the minutiae, obviously, but in their grand sweep and broad features. We can thus expect Turkish influence in the Middle East to grow over the coming years and decades, even if it falls short of the imperial heights reached in the past. Its influence will be multifaceted, and attitudes toward minority religions will surely find a place in the mix. If the Turks stay true to their Ottoman roots, the results could be a genuinely better life for the Middle East’s Christians, Jews and other hard-pressed religious minorities.

**Conclusion**

None of this proves that a better life is dawning for Christians and Jews in Turkey, much less in the Middle East overall. A lot can go wrong and perhaps will. Nevertheless, there is more cause for optimism today than there has been for a hundred years.

The liberalizing trends we are seeing in Turkey are not the result of policies or ideas imposed from the outside.\textsuperscript{§§} They are indigenous, emerging organically from the

\textsuperscript{§§} That is not to say they are not influenced by outside forces, for they certainly are. Turkey’s desire for EU membership, though waning in recent years, is a powerful incentive toward liberalization and religious tolerance. The desire for good relations with the United States is another.
history, culture, and geopolitical imperatives of the Turkish Republic *qua* successor state to the great Ottoman Empire. It is because of the authenticity and historical rootedness of these trends, both inside Turkey and throughout the region, that we have reason for hope.
Endnotes


19 Probably the best introduction to the Ottoman Empire is still the classic by Lord Kinross, The Ottoman Centuries. Harper Perennial, 1979.


22 Shaw, p 152.

23 Shaw, p 152.


28 Quataert, Donald. The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 5.


30 See Kinross, Lord. Atatürk: A Biography of Mustafa Kemal, Father of Modern Turkey, Quill, 1992. This is the other standard from Lord Kinross, a perfect companion to his The Ottoman Centuries. Well worth reading.


34 Shaw and Shaw, p. 384.

35 For a good exposition of the Deep State in Turkey, see Kaplan, Robert. Eastward to Tartary: Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, Random House, New York, 2000, ch. 11.


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67 “Europe’s wavering on Turkey’s EU accession is jeopardizing the EU’s credibility and threatening to tarnish its good image,” writes Martti Ahtisaari, a former Finnish president and Nobel laureate. "How can European leaders be trusted if they continue to go back on their word, stalling, and perhaps scuttling a process that began a decade ago with so much promise, has produced so many positive effects, and holds such potential for the future?" See Ahtisaari, Martti. “Cold on Turkey,” The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/11/opinion/11iht-ahtissari.html, 10 September 2009.


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93 Huntington, p. 135.


95 Merry, “The Huntington Thesis and Turkey’s New Role.”

96 Merry, “The Huntington Thesis and Turkey’s New Role.”