



Turkey: Schools, Economy, Move in Islamist Direction

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is personally committed to a more decidedly Islamist ideology than has been typical of Turkey as a whole. And now, changes in government policy indicate that Turkey may be taking incremental steps away from so-called secularism toward becoming an overtly religious state.



According to [a February 24 story for ANSAmед](#), Turkey's Prime Minister is pushing for "reforms" in the nation's school system that would reduce the required amount of formal schooling in Turkey, while simultaneously increasing the prominence of Koranic schools:

The goals of an education reform bill introduced by the Islamic party of Turkey's Premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan have been characterised by opposition parties as aiming to halve the length of compulsory schooling to promote more Koranic schools and veil wearing. The opposition secular press, trades unionists and other commentators, have for a month now, but especially over the past two days, been aiming their criticisms at the Islamic tendencies of the reforms of alleged faults in the country's education system.

As noted in the ANSAmед article, the educational "reform" would reduce the required years of formal education from eight years to a mere four years of school. At the same time, Islamic schools would be promoted:

A reduction in the number of years of compulsory education would also promote the so-called "Imam Hatip Lisesi", the religious Islamic schools, like the one in which Mr Erdogan was educated. Following its third electoral victory in succession, with nearly 50% of votes cast, Erdogan's single-party pro-Islamic government has already abolished the minimum age requirement for attendance at such schools and this reform would encourage children to give up attending their secular secondary schools in favour of religious institutions which now would take over some of the functions of the grammar schools....

The move is seen as being linked to the increasing pressure on young girls in country areas to give up their schooling and the dangers deriving from a reduction of the age for starting an apprenticeship to eleven.

At the same time that Erdogan's party is moving education in Turkey in a more Islamist direction, they are also pushing for changes in the nation's economy that would move it more closely in line with the teachings of sharia law. For the first time in the history of its government, Turkey will begin issuing sharia-compliant bonds (*sukuk*) later this year. For Muslims, the *sukuk* is an alternative to interest-bearing bonds. Since sharia law forbids the charging of interest, a system of "renting" *sukuk* back to its issuer takes the place of interest. Given the size of the global Islamic community, and the need for channeling funds into investments while avoiding interest, the decision of Turkey to enter the *sukuk*



Written by [James Heiser](#) on March 2, 2012

market is drawing worldwide attention. [Reuters reported on February 22](#):

Despite espousing Islamic values, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's government shied away from taking the plunge with a sukuk issue during its first decade in power, out of fear of giving ammunition to critics who accuse the ruling AK Party of seeking to roll back state secularism by stealth.

"For a few billion dollars of funding there could be negative results in domestic politics," said a deputy chief executive at a leading Turkish bank, who declined to be named because of the political sensitivity of the subject.

In 2008, the Supreme Court came close to shutting down Erdogan's AK Party after ruling it was a centre of Islamist activity. But since then, the government has won the upper hand over old foes in the military and judiciary....

"Turkey could very easily issue a couple of billion dollars worth of sukuk. It will probably issue \$500 million or \$1 billion at first and see how it goes," said Osman Akyuz, secretary general of the Participation Banks' Association of Turkey.

Critics, alarmed at developments both in education and the Turkish economy, can easily point to Erdogan as a master of incrementalism.

Erdogan has been Prime Minister of Turkey since 2003, but his record for militancy was well-known long before he assumed that office. [As BBC News reported in November 2002](#), Erdogan's extreme views "earned him a conviction in 1998 for inciting religious hatred":

He had publicly read an Islamic poem including the lines: "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers..."

He was sentenced to 10 months in jail, but was freed after four.

However, because of his criminal record, he was barred from standing in elections or holding political office.

Parliament last year changed the constitution to allow Mr Erdogan to stand for a parliamentary seat.

And, within two years of that constitutional change, the man who had been jailed for his Islamist extremism was ruling the entire nation.

Erdogan pushed for Turkey to be admitted as a member nation of the European Union, but his own conduct during trips throughout the EU raised further questions about his views. For example, Erdogan's inflammatory conduct during a trip last year to Germany raised questions in the German media about the direction in which the Turkish ruler was seeking to lead his nation. As [reported for The New American in March 2011](#), Erdogan openly mocked the notion that Turks in Germany should assimilate into German society:

The Prime Minister of Turkey has a message for the 3 million people of Turkish origin now living in Germany: "You are part of Germany, but you are also part our great Turkey." Speaking on February 27 to an audience of thousands gathered to hear him in Düsseldorf, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told his "compatriots" to resist assimilation into German society ("Yes, integrate yourselves into German society but don't assimilate yourselves.") even as he engaged in saber rattling as he stoked his audience: "Now Turkey will at last start building its own war



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planes."

At the same time, Erdogan continues to press for Turkey to become a full member of the European Union — a move which would allow unrestricted Turkish immigration into the rest of the EU.

According to a story at Spiegel Online, Erdogan intended to provoke the nation that he was visiting: "Erdogan knows that this statement amounts to a provocation in Germany — no politician here is demanding that Turkish immigrants should deny their roots or give up their culture."

Erdogan appears to be signaling to his nation and the world that he now understands his position — and that of his political party — to be secure. And if the changes currently underway in Turkey are any indication, that nation may be making incremental steps toward the type of Islamic state envisioned by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Photo of Recep Tayyip Erdogan: AP Images



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