

Rise of the New Caliphate

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (February 2024)



A photo of Israeli soccer player Sagiv Jehezkel's, taken from a now-deleted social media post by Turkish soccer club Antalyaspor.

Israeli soccer player, Sagiv Jehezkel, was recently deported from Turkey for an act, according to Turkey's justice minister, of "inciting people to hatred and hostility." The heinous act Jehezkel committed was to publicly show support for the hostages of the 7th October Hamas attack on Israeli citizens. This he did by turning to the camera, after scoring a goal for his club, Antalyaspor, and holding up a bandaged hand. Across the bandage was written *100 days*, *7.10* next to a Star of David.

His crime was described as "disregarding the values and

sensitivities of Turkey," as though a country possessed such attributes. Allowing for such personification, what might those values and sensitivities be? In a country purported to be a democracy, wouldn't they necessarily reflect the values and sensitivities of its citizens? And wouldn't the values and sensitivities of those citizens be diverse? Or are we talking of a monolithic culture where every citizen is moulded, factory-like, to think, speak and act in exactly the same way?

Turkey's record on diversity is abysmal. From a population comprising almost 25% non-Muslims just over a century ago to less than 1% today, one has to question the reasons for such a dramatic change.

Turkey's creation as a republic in 1922, on the dying embers of the Ottoman Empire and the dissolution of the Caliphate, was part of a process to forge a homogenized state. The multi-ethnic make-up of the Empire was seen as a weakness. The solution—homogeneity. Turkishness was still an embryonic ideology, most subjects within the Empire thought of themselves as Muslims. Indeed, the Empire was organized along lines not of ethnicity (an idea imported from the West) but of religion. Infidels (those not subscribing to the Muslim faith) were simply *dhimmi*—religiously sanctioned inferiors.

Until recently viewed as god-like (even today Hollywood style portraits are abundantly displayed), the hero of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal, saw the Muslim religion as a weakness, stultifying and uncondusive to progress. But he concurred with his predecessors homogeneity was crucial to securing the borders of the new state, which still included sizeable indigenous minorities, and sought to complete the process begun under them. Christians had to go.

Kemal was so highly esteemed, largely credited for 'liberating' what was left of the Empire from being occupied by the Allies (Turkey entered World War One on the side of Germany by bombarding Russian ships before announcing its

entry into the war) and hauling the new country into the modern era, he has since been referred to as Ataturk (Father of Turks).

Ataturk's accomplishments were no mean feat, he managed to fend off invading forces and construct a nation from disparate peoples who were, until then, simply Muslims, not Turks. Indeed, until the rise of Turkish nationalism, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, 'Turk' was a form of insult directed at the uncouth.

However, there is growing discontent with the narrative of 'Kemal as saviour of the Turks' within Turkey, largely driven by the religious element of the country (a large element which Erdogan appeals to and, by doing so, ensures he remains in power). For the move from a religiously organized state to a secular one involved divesting religious authorities of their powers and containing their influence. Madrasas (religious schools) were closed; headscarves were banned from government institutions; and the script of the country changed from Arabic to a western alphabet.

Turkish 'ethnicity' was propagated with government-driven slogans such as, "Happy is he who calls himself a Turk," and, "Citizen, speak Turkish!" The changes were seismic. Many were repressive. As well as the relegation of religion, Kurds would not only be banned from speaking their own language but denied an identity. There was no such thing as a Kurd, they were "mountain Turks." What was left of the non-Muslim population faced financial ruin through punitive taxes and legislation that discriminated in Muslims' favour, and the Istanbul pogroms of 1955 further diminished the largest Christian minority remaining (already a fraction of its former numbers from a generation previously) in Turkey.

But Turkey remained a key ally of the West, crucial to the NATO alliance. Just as the West feted dictators like Saddam Hussein and Colonel Gaddafi before they fell out of favour, so

the West supported the repressive regimes of Turkey that continued, and continue, to flagrantly breach human rights. Turkey still remains an important ally. It's strategic position, between Russia and the Middle East; astride the continents of Europe and Asia; and controlling the straits between the Black and Mediterranean Seas, ensures whatever political disagreements arise between Turkey and the West, it will continue to be wooed.

From the strains of the Cold War, through both Iraq Wars, the rise of Islamic State and now the Russia-Ukraine war, Turkey has always managed to play its cards well. Emphasizing military power and a nationalist agenda (regardless of the political party in power) to achieve its objectives over the years, these features remain. They are the constants of Turkish international relations. But one thing has changed, dramatically so, over the last couple of decades and cracks have begun to appear in Ataturk's legacy—the re-emergence of religion as a powerful force.

In 1998, Turkey's Refah Partisi (Welfare Party) was banned, charged with harbouring an Islamist agenda. Amongst its members was Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's current prime minister. That same year, Erdogan publicly recited a poem containing the lines:

*The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets
The minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers*

He consequently received a short prison sentence for inciting religious hatred. The lesson proved instructive. After his release, Erdogan distanced himself from his former associates and in 2001 formed the Justice and Development Party (AKP). He swept to power in 2002 and has been there ever since.

Riding on the success of appealing to the country's religiously oriented population, Erdogan campaigned to overturn some of Ataturk's key pillars of state. This included removal of the ban on headscarves in government institutions, by appealing to arguments of diversity and equal rights. He has since bolstered this element of religious support by opening Turkey's doors to Muslims fleeing conflict zones, especially in the Middle East, and used this large refugee population to apply pressure on Europe, by transporting thousands to Turkey's border with Greece and allowing them to flood through.

His survival of a coup in 2015 has only emboldened him to drive Turkey's foreign relations in an increasingly Islamic direction, although with enough adroitness to portray Turkey as a key ally in the fight against terrorism. Thousands of madrasas have reopened under Erdogan's leadership and mosque building has increased dramatically.

Erdogan is courting the growing religious element in Turkey, threatening its secular institutions. Stoking religious sensibilities within the country has only served to align it with more religiously conservative countries in the region. In terms of increasing his popularity with Muslims inside and outside the country this works in his favour but the secular, democratic nature of the Turkish state is on the back foot. The affluent and middle class are nervous and have been since his rise to power. They desperately seek to protect their property from Erdogan's economic blunders and the potential of an Iran-like path, that would see the underprivileged in an alliance with the religiously inspired to appropriate their wealth.

Events around the world, especially those on Turkey's doorstep, have revealed an increasingly aggressive foreign policy emanating from the country. From claims to former Ottoman territories; alliances and agreements with Muslim countries (military and economic) to the detriment of non-

Muslim ones; defiance of Western strategic interests; and meddling in other countries elections, there seems to be a rising neo-Ottomanism. This is mirrored by renewed interest in, and popularity of, the last Ottoman Caliph of note, Abdul Hamid II. Known in the West as the Red Sultan for ordering massacres of infidels, he is a source of pride amongst many in Turkey; an icon of Ottoman and Muslim power. Other heroes include the Three Pashas: Talaat, Enver and Cemal, admired for their ruthlessness by the Nazis.

Whether Erdogan's motives in his domestic and foreign policies are purely demagogic or really have a religious underlay to them, the result has caused jitters amongst Western countries and Turkey's neighbours. Erdogan, increasingly confident at calling out the West, and comfortable with being seen as a champion for Muslims around the world, has cultivated a persona just short of claiming religious sanction.

The claim by Turkish politicians that Jehezkel disregarded the values and sensitivities of Turkey are, in truth, vilification for public support of Jews (who have left Turkey in record numbers in recent years). Otherwise, what are those values and sensitivities referred to? They are those of valuing a Muslim life above an infidel's and being sensitive to Muslim suffering but not Jewish.

Jehezkel did not express support for the war in Gaza or complacency for Palestinian suffering. He simply drew attention to the kidnapped hostages still missing after 100 days. If expressing support for hostages is a serious enough offence to warrant ejection from a state, there must be an abhorrence of sympathy for those taken.

Clearly, expressing sympathy for Jewish suffering is anathema in Turkey. As in Ottoman times, people are judged according to their religious identity. This type of social division is a key component of Islam and if one is to seriously be considered leader of that world, one has to be seen to support

it. Welcome to the new Caliphate.

[Table of Contents](#)

Nikos Akritas has worked as a teacher in Britain, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)