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Turkey's Headscarf Dilemma: Is There a Way Out?

By [Soner Cagaptay](#)

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Note: This PolicyWatch is based on the author's recent op-ed in Financial Times Deutschland. [Read the original op-ed](#) (in German).

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the July 22 parliamentary elections with a solid mandate. A major task awaiting the new AKP government is resolving the controversy surrounding the turban, an Islamic head covering for women that emerged in Turkey in the 1980s. The Turkish turban -- not to be confused with the south Asian male turban -- is considered a political symbol by Turkish courts and is banned on school campuses. Although the AKP did not deal with the turban issue during its first term, the controversy has now taken center stage in Turkish politics: in a striking break with precedent, the wife of recently elected president Abdullah Gul wears a turban. Can the AKP resolve this issue? And what are its implications for Europe and the United States?

Background

The turban question is a political wedge that bitterly divides Turkish society. It is tied to the same set of issues that resulted in the July elections, which were called after the AKP tried to elect Gul as president earlier in the year. Millions of secular Turks demonstrated against his nomination, and the courts blocked the presidential vote in the legislature, paving the way for early parliamentary elections. The turban also looms large in Europe, where many countries seem to take cues from Turkey on the issue. France has banned the headwear in schools, and the issue has generated controversy in other European countries including Germany.

Conservative women in Turkey have always covered their heads as a sign of modesty. There are a variety of styles to choose from: an eastern and southern European-style handkerchief, the *esarp*, worn by urban women; a more conservative late-Ottoman-era version called *basortusu*; and a gauze cloth, *yazma/yemeni*, worn by rural women. According to a 2006 study by Bosphorus University in Istanbul, less than half (48 percent) of Turkish women used these traditional head coverings.

The turban, however, is a specific, nontraditional headwear that arose in Turkey during the early 1980s after first appearing in other Muslim countries. The turban exposes no hair and, unlike the other scarves, covers part of the face and is pinned tightly to the head. Despite efforts to popularize the turban in the 1990s -- especially as a symbol of Islamism and/or virtue -- it never became a mass phenomenon. Today, only 11 percent of Turkish women wear the turban, according to the Bosphorus University poll.

Practice and Tolerance in Turkey

Some Turks believe that the judicial prohibition against turbans on school campuses should remain intact, viewing the headwear as a political symbol. Yet, the spirit of democratic freedom suggests that the turban, which is also a symbol of religious observance, be permitted. Would allowing the turban on campuses make Turkey more free? A look at more general attitudes toward Islamic practices across the country suggests otherwise.

Islamic practice in Turkey is far from homogenous, with varying levels of tolerance for nonpracticing individuals. In this regard, the country can be separated into three zones: the west, the center, and the southeast. For example, tolerance during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month when devout Muslims fast from sunrise until sunset, varies from region to region.

In western Turkey (which comprises Istanbul and Ankara as well as the coastal regions), tolerance is cherished, in part because this cosmopolitan area is home to large communities of Turks and other Muslims who were expelled from the Balkans and Central Europe. For instance, one could have lunch at a restaurant during Ramadan in this region without problem -- and even get served by a fasting waiter. Tolerance for practice and tolerance for nonpractice are two sides of the same coin in western Turkey.

Then there is conservative central Turkey, where tolerance toward those who do not practice Islam diminishes. In most of this rural region, observance is deemed universal except among the Alevis, many of whom follow a liberalized form of Islam that deemphasizes practice. Hence, one could have lunch at a restaurant during Ramadan in this region, but only in a curtained establishment under the assumption that one is an Alevi who does not practice traditional Sunni Islam.

Finally, there is southeastern Turkey, where practice is deemed not only universal, but also compulsory. In this mostly Sunni Kurdish area, Kurds follow the orthodox Shafii school, unlike the liberal Hanefi school of Sunni Islam followed elsewhere in Turkey. If one tried to lunch in a restaurant here during Ramadan, one might be insulted or even physically harmed. Indeed, each year there is news of an unobservant college student in this area being beaten up, thrown into a river, or even murdered for not fasting during Ramadan.

Is There a Way Forward?

What would happen if Turkey permitted the turban on campuses? Conditions in Istanbul and the West would not change much. In low-tolerance areas, however, things would be different. In rural central Turkey, most women would feel uncomfortable without turbans, and in the southeast, women would feel compelled to wear them. Instead of resolving the issue, then, lifting the ban would create a new problem for the many Turkish women who do not wear the turban or prefer to cover their heads with traditional scarves. These women would be under social pressure to conform to the new practice of "virtuous living."

Although the turban question must be resolved at some point, the current AKP is unlikely to do so. At the moment, the party seems too partial to pass judgment on this issue: the wives of all AKP leaders, including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, wear the turban. AKP meddling in the issue would be seen by secular Turks as a partisan move, which could spark anti-AKP demonstrations and even a political crisis.

In order to resolve the issue, the AKP or another party must convince the population that it is ready to protect women who do not wear turbans. This party would also need to crack down on efforts to impose the headwear on reluctant women -- if necessary, by enacting powerful hate crimes legislation.

Implications for Turkey, Europe, and the United States

With lifestyle concerns becoming fault lines in many democracies, the turban will be the most divisive issue in Turkey in the coming months due to the unique nature of Turkish secularism. When Kemal Ataturk founded Turkey as a secular republic after World War I, he looked to Europe, and especially France, for his model. Whereas American secularism provides freedom *of* religion, the French version that Ataturk adopted, known as *laicite*, emphasizes freedom *from* religion -- that is, keeping religion, its practice, and symbols out of politics.

In the United States, the question of permitting turbans in places such as schools would not necessarily raise eyebrows. In the European secularism that Turkey has adopted, however, the turban is a controversial issue with iconic force. From Washington's perspective, it would best be left as an internal Turkish debate. But on

the European front, the way Ankara chooses to deal with the turban will have repercussions for several countries, given their apparent reliance on Turkey as a touchstone for government policy toward Islamic practice. Unless the AKP successfully defuses the matter, the turban will remain a divisive issue in Turkey's already charged political environment and may even cause a political crisis.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

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