



ABDULLAH GÜL

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Turkey's President Abdullah Gül is a controversial figure. His nomination as president by the ruling, centrist-Islamist AK Party in 2007 drew strong opposition from secular Turks and was initially blocked by the Constitutional Court. With new allegations of nationalist plots and Islamist conspiracies swirling in Turkey, Gül, on the eve of a four-day visit to Pakistan, spoke recently with NEWSWEEK PAKISTAN's Ejaz Haider in Ankara. Excerpts:

Do you see the recent arrests of military officers in an alleged coup plot as part of a larger conflict between the AK Party and the Turkish military?

The entire episode is being misunderstood. Turkey has an elected govern-

ment. When we look back at Turkish political life, there have been interventions. But all of those things are history. None of that is possible now. Turkey has started full-membership negotiations with the EU, which means we have to conform to the rules of a democratic system. For a country practicing [these] criteria and going through accession negotiations, it is not possible for democracy to be interrupted. Of course, in large institutions there can always be individuals involved in wrongdoing.

There is also a sense that the issue denotes a secular-Islamist fault line.

Turkey is a Muslim-majority country. But our state is based on democratic values, secular values, and the rule of law. State affairs and religious affairs are separate. I strongly believe in such a separation.

There is a wide consensus in the Turkish public on accepting these principles. As for the meaning of the term [secularism] and how it is to be implemented, we continue to have in-depth discussions.

Some observers have noted that Turkey is reorienting itself away from the West and toward the Middle East.

This is not correct. But Turkey cannot have a unidirectional foreign policy. We are at the juncture of three continents. We are part of NATO, we are negotiat-

ing for full EU membership, and we are an Islamic country with roots in the Middle East, Asia, and the Caucasus. None of these aspects can be neglected.

What is Turkey's view of Israel? There has been much friction since Turkey canceled Israel's participation in NATO exercises and announced that it would hold a joint exercise with Syria.

Turkey has diplomatic relations with Israel and the Arab world. This situation has always been considered a positive. We have always had the opportunity behind closed doors to tell the Israelis their wrongdoings. At this stage, it is very important to put an end to the suffering of the Palestinian people, and it is very important at this point that they are able to live in an independent state so that Israel and Palestine can coexist peacefully. In that regard, I believe the Arab peace plan is a very important initiative.

How does Turkey view its role in NATO, given that some analysts in the West have accused the AK Party of reaching out to illiberal regimes in the Middle East?

Turkey is among the first members of NATO and a very important one. At the moment, Turkey has the second-largest NATO army. For that reason, Turkey plays a significant role in preserving world peace and has been involved in peacekeeping activities across the world. Nowadays, NATO itself is transforming itself. And for that, Turkey is playing a very active role.

'WE ARE AT THE JUNCTURE OF THREE CONTINENTS: PART OF NATO, NEGOTIATING FOR EU MEMBERSHIP, AND AN ISLAMIC COUNTRY.'

ment, a Constitution, independent courts and prosecutors. There is division of powers according to the Constitution. Prosecutors can investigate, and if there's a case they take it to the court. The courts have to decide if anyone was breaking rules. This is not a struggle between the Army and one party.

Turkey has a history of many coups. If the details about [the current plot] are correct, there clearly is anti-AK Party sentiment in the military.