

A Euro-Battered Mr. Yilmaz Comes to Washington

by [Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.



Brief Analysis

On the heels of the European Union's dismissal of Turkey's membership bid, Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz meets President Clinton at the White House tomorrow at a potentially fateful time for Turkey's relations with the West. Ultimately, Euro-Turkish relations need to be strengthened if Turkey is to be fully integrated into the West, but until that happens, Washington needs to pursue a far bolder policy, to preserve Turkey as a Western security asset.

Who is Mesut Yilmaz? Yilmaz, 50, captured leadership of his Motherland Party with the backing of then President Turgut Ozal, in 1991. Yet, many Turks already see him as an "old face." He is in his third stint as prime minister, and, though many have held the office longer, only current President Suleyman Demirel served more non-consecutive terms as prime minister than has Yilmaz. All Yilmaz' prime ministries, however, have been brief -- two months in 1991, three months last year, and just under six months so far this year, the latter two leading minority governments.

Yilmaz has so far failed to project a strong leadership image. He is criticized for his plodding speaking style, lack of vision (particularly in comparison with his mentor, the late Ozal), inability to enforce his will in his party, and preoccupation with his rivalry with center-right rival Tansu Ciller. In his current role, he is hobbled by the perceptions that he achieved his office only through military efforts to bring down his predecessor, Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan, and that the military remains the effective power in the state on key security-related matters, internal as well as external. Yet, Yilmaz also has clear assets as a leader. He is considered "clean" among often corrupt competitors, and competent if not colorful. He also has generally solid secularist credentials--buffed by his leadership of the current government, an unwieldy coalition whose sole raison d'etre is opposition to Islamism--in a party that traditionally has had an influential Islamist wing.

Current coalition outlook: Yilmaz's minority coalition consists of his own center-right Motherland Party (MP), deputy prime minister Bulent Ecevit's center-left Democratic Left Party, and a rump party of defectors from Ciller's center-right True Path Party. For its majority in parliamentary votes, the government depends on leftist Deniz Baykal's Republican People's Party, the heir to state-founder Kemal Ataturk's party. The glue of the coalition, aside from secularism, is mutual fear of elections. That may well continue for some time. New elections will result only when Baykal or Ecevit are convinced his party is running well ahead of the other's for supremacy on the left, or when

Yilmaz is convinced that his party is running well ahead of Ciller's for supremacy on the secular right. The defection of any one of these leaders would end the government. Otherwise, the government could last into 1999, if not until scheduled elections in 2000. One party that most likely will not be on the ballot is Erbakan's Refah, which will probably soon be banned by the nation's Constitutional Court.

Government scorecard: This Yilmaz government's primary and most popular accomplishment has been the abolition of religious secondary schools, one of the military's key demands. Most Turks believe that reform will limit the ability of political Islamists to develop new recruits. As the government pledged upon assuming office, there has been some increased attention to human rights, including a new anti-torture initiative that contains positive elements; based in past performance, human rights groups are withholding judgment pending implementation. Economic policy has been confused, less because of anticipated differences between Yilmaz and his left-of-center coalition partners than because of squabbles within Yilmaz' own economic team, including a sharp public disagreement between Yilmaz and his finance minister over whether to accept an IMF-crafted austerity program. Though public frustration with the government's failure to make a dent in 80-plus-percent inflation is growing, the memory of Erbakan-era tensions is sufficiently strong to sustain a residue of public goodwill for this government for a while longer. Yilmaz' tough response to the EU summit-including a rejection of the EU's proffered European Conference, designed to give Turkey a link with the EU-has crystallized Turkish anger and may help solidify his public standing.

What Washington could do: Turkey's perceived rejection by the EU last week-the EU never actually used that word, it merely kept Turkey at arm's length while welcoming all other applicants-is potentially a historical watershed. It comes in an era when secular Turkey has been beleaguered by leadership crises, a growing Islamist challenge at the polls, and signs that decreasing numbers of Turks (perhaps taking the hint from their EU neighbors) see themselves as Europeans. The prospect that strategically crucial Turkey could be lost to the West is real. The United States must do as much as possible to avert that strategic disaster. Turkey's democratic shortcomings and Washington's eagerness to resolve the Cyprus problem and ease Greek-Turkish tensions are well-known. But, for the sake of larger U.S. interests, now is the time to buck up, not beat up, Turkey. Among the actions the President could take to signal U.S. support for this secularist regime are:

- Announce a Presidential trip to Turkey as a visible sign of U.S. support. Turks read significance into their difficulty in attracting senior-level U.S. visitors, and they still smart over former Secretary of State Christopher's failure to visit but once despite his constant presence in the neighborhood. A presidential journey would call attention to the urgency of the situation.
- Establish a high-level commission, perhaps on the Gore-Chernomyrdin model, to spur bilateral relations and serve as a clearing-house for problems.
- Invite Turkey to participate fully in our ballistic missile defense program. In her path-breaking speech to NATO this week, Secretary of State Albright called the proliferation danger "the most overriding security interest of our time." Bordered and probably targeted by several proliferators, Ankara lacks both missiles and missile defense. Turkish interest in joining the U.S.-Israeli Arrow missile program, bruited during last week's visit to Turkey by the Israeli defense minister, is a good place to start.
- Pledge high-level U.S. support for Turkish arms requests. Washington retains an important stake in bilateral security relations and a U.S.-influenced Turkish military. The Administration can't guarantee Congressional approval for arms sales, but it can promise that Congressional battles will be fought by the most senior-level officials, not office directors or deputy assistant secretaries.

- Affirm at the Presidential-level U.S. support for Turkey's role as a strategic outlet for Caspian Sea oil and commend Turkey for its regionally pacesetter role building ties with Israel.
- Boost U.S.-Turkish economic ties (and assist the Turkish economy) by easing quotas on Turkish textiles, supporting a reasonable IMF arrangement for Turkey, and exploring the possibilities of a free-trade agreement.
- Increase cultural ties by boosting the number of Turkish students who study in the United States on Fulbright grants and other government-funded fellowships and expand opportunities for academic exchanges between Turkish and American universities.

Speaking of Turkey at his press conference this week, President Clinton declared, "If you look at the size of the country, if you look at its geostrategic significance, where it is, what it can block and what it can open doors to, it is terribly important." Over time, the United States must try to heal Turkish-EU relations. Close ties with neighboring Europe is the best guarantee of Turkey's integration with the West. But with the Europeans having spurned their opportunity to help, it is now up to Washington to do its best to make sure that Turkish doors are open, not blocked, when the next Iraq or Bosnia crisis prompts the West to come calling.

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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