

Turkey:

Domestic Change and Regional Politics

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The Turkish military was the driving force behind events that led to Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's resignation. Also important, however, were civilian elements of the Turkish establishment, which was acting on all cylinders. The most powerful delegitimation of Erbakan's government was the unprecedented cooperation between rival trade unions and the business community in calling for the end of his government. One official called this a "post-modern coup". President Suleyman Demirel also played a very important leadership role by criticizing Erbakan for straying from secularism and not abiding by the anti-fundamentalist demands of the National Security Council and then switching gears with a warning to the military not to stage a coup.

The new coalition government led by Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz was formed on two key foundations: secularism and non-corruption. Unfortunately, it is another ideologically incoherent hybrid of the sort that has ruled Turkey since 1991. Its two principal partners are Yilmaz's right-of-center, free-market oriented Motherland Party and Bulent Ecevit's social democratic Democratic Left Party. The coalition's program emphasizes human rights, secularism, and good government. It has pledged legislation on an eight-year, uninterrupted secular education program that will lead to the closure of many religious schools. Whatever the government's actions, Islamism is likely to remain a strong political current in Turkey. Regarding the Kurdish issue, the government has specifically stated that it does not view this as an ethnic problem; it is unlikely that this government will promote Kurdish-language education or Kurdish-language television and radio.

Turkey in the Region

Notwithstanding some rhetoric to the contrary, the government is unlikely to take major initiatives to improve ties with Tehran and Baghdad. The increased prominence of the military in Turkish foreign-policy decisions most likely means that Turkey will remain very wary of Iran and will not openly seek to undermine U.S. policy initiatives in the region. A more confrontational policy regarding Cyprus can be expected, particularly as European Union (EU) accession talks with the Greek Cypriots proceed and as the mid-1998 date for the arrival of Russian anti-aircraft missiles in Cyprus approaches. Otherwise, no dramatic departures in foreign policy are likely. The military, backed by the civilian foreign-policy elite, will assure that Turkey's relationship with Israel continues to grow. Politicians

remain somewhat hesitant to flaunt links with Israel-Yilmaz did not mention it in his government program statement on foreign policy-suggesting their concern that the overwhelmingly Muslim Turkish public is wary. For Turkey, ties with Israel are seen potentially to serve three major ends: boosting support in the U.S. Congress, intimidating Syria, and providing a "back-door" source of sophisticated and inventory-compatible arms that is unimpeded by the anti-Turkish lobbies that make Washington a problematic arms supplier.

U.S. Policy Toward Turkey

As the anti-Western leader of a traditionally strong ally, Erdogan posed a difficult problem for U.S. policymakers. Washington did not want to appear reflexively negative at the sight of an Islamist government coming to power through democratic means, so the U.S. initially tried to send out positive signals to Erdogan's government. This, however, disturbed the U.S.'s traditional friends within the Turkish secular establishment which-along with Erdogan's trips to Iran and Libya-led to the U.S. eventually taking an "arm's-length" approach to the Refah leadership. The most effective means of now signaling Turks that Washington strongly supports the secularist turn in their government would be a more assertive executive branch leadership role regarding promised arms transfers.

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The Internal Situation

There were three major forces behind the Refah phenomenon that Turkey still will need to contend with: religion, Turkish nationalism, and a form of economic populism. Turkey has become very prosperous over the last decade and, as a result, is faced with an increasing problem of "haves-versus-have-nots". The tensions that arise from this phenomenon will allow the political forces behind parties like Refah to remain intact for a long time. This internal situation has left a legacy of polarization in Turkey both in the struggle between Islamism and secularism and in the way Turks see their role in the world. Those who are Western-oriented see the stakes as very high indeed. At the same time, Refah's political marginalization would encourage its re-radicalization; hopelessly excluded from power, Refah would lack incentive to moderate its anti-Western, anti-American, and anti-Israeli positions and rhetoric.

Foreign and Security Policy

Turkish nationalism will remain an extremely powerful force in foreign and security policies. Nationalism will not necessarily take the form of pan-Turkism or neo-Ottomanism, but rather a greater assertiveness in relation to Turkey's own regional interests. This is the trend of recent years and one that will be reinforced by the growing role now played by public opinion and the media in foreign policy. Turkey has three major regional preoccupations: concern about Russia, compounded by suspicion that Western allies will disregard Turkey's views in their own pursuit of improved ties with Moscow; potential conflict with Greece over Cyprus and the Aegean, an area where Turks may be willing to concede a bit to garner favor with Washington; and water, territorial, and PKK-related disputes with Syria. Syria's support for the PKK is one of the driving forces behind Turkey's relationship with Israel.

Establishing closer ties with the West will prove very difficult for Turkey. The European Union, while in the process of expanding its membership and redefining the identity of Europe, continues to emphasize Turkish "otherness".

Furthermore, NATO-of which Turkey is the most vulnerable member-is changing in ways unwelcome to Ankara.

Although Turkey would like to feel assured that its territorial integrity is guaranteed by Article Five of the NATO Charter-the mutual defense pledge-the alliance seems to be shifting in a direction in which NATO will become less automatic in its security guarantees and much more conditional in lending support. Turkey already experienced NATO's uncertain reliability with the alliance's limited response during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis and war.

Nevertheless, there is a real opportunity now for a stronger U.S.-Turkey relationship, but this will require a new agenda, one that refocuses the relationship on longer-term shared interests rather than short-term issues and one that responds to Turkey's real security needs. In an era of austerity and Congressional criticism of Turkey, bilateral

relations should focus on what is militarily important and financially and politically do-able, such as counter-terrorism cooperation and defense against weapons of mass destruction, including ballistic missiles.

The Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Eytan Fisch.

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