

U.S. Relations with Erbakan's Turkey

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Brief Analysis

With pro-Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan at the helm of the Turkish government since late June, Washington faces a rare policy dilemma: how to deal with an ally whose leader harbors long-term goals inimical to U.S. interests. The U.S. won its first major policy challenge of the Erbakan era when the Turkish parliament last week agreed to a five-month extension of Operation Provide Comfort (OPC), the Turkey-based, multinational air operation that deters Iraqi attacks on civilians and enforces a no-fly zone in northern Iraq. After having cautiously embraced Erbakan to accomplish that end, however, the U.S. now should alter its approach, lest it inadvertently boost the fortunes of a politician whose anti-U.S., anti-Western, and anti-Israel sentiments are well established.

The problem. Military influence over Turkish foreign affairs is largely intact. Accordingly, Erbakan was convinced to reverse his long-standing opposition to OPC; moreover, fundamental Turkish policies bitterly criticized by Erbakan over the years, such as NATO membership and defense ties to the U.S., appear unassailable for now.

Nevertheless, Erbakan remains a serious problem for U.S. interests. His long-term goal illustrated in campaign promises to establish an "Islamic NATO" and "Islamic common market" is to orient Turkey more towards the East than the West. Using what foreign policy flexibility he has to signal his independent views, he has surprised secularist Foreign Minister Tansu Ciller and the military as well as the many pundits who predicted that Erbakan would be entirely shut out of foreign affairs with his policy departures. He has over-ridden foreign ministry announcements in choosing Iran as the destination of his first foreign sojourn this weekend and in postponing plans for a senior Israeli official to visit Turkey this week to sign a defense industrial cooperation agreement.

Specific policy initiatives aside, an Erbakan prime ministry poses several fundamental challenges to U.S. interests and U.S.-Turkish relations. First, Erbakan's very presence in office renders difficult the task of the U.S. Administration and other traditional Turkey supporters to convince skeptics in Congress and elsewhere (including the European Union) that Turkey remains set on a secular, democratic, pro-Western path. Second, his conspiratorial views and penchant for making offensive remarks, unless kept under more control than his history suggests is likely, inevitably will alienate many who count themselves as Turkey's friends. Earlier this year, Erbakan called Israel "a timeless enemy"; even since taking office, Erbakan reportedly told a private gathering that the two stripes on Israel's flag reflect Zionist plans to conquer all land between the Nile and Euphrates Rivers. Third, Erbakan's

openly expressed sympathy for and connections with Islamic radicals such as Iran, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas raise potentially serious security problems. As prime minister and a member of Turkey's powerful National Security Council, Erdogan presumably will gain privileged access to NATO secrets, bilateral counter-terrorism planning, and other security-related information. Fourth, Erdogan is an ideologue who seeks ultimately to re-orient Turkey in ways that surely would be incompatible with U.S. interests. Consistent in words and policies throughout his 27-year political career, Erdogan as deputy prime minister in the mid-1970s persistently undertook efforts, often successful, to Islamicize Turkish society and government bureaucracy. Although constitutionally proscribed from advocating a state based on Islamic law, neither he nor his top deputies directly deny that that is their goal for Turkey. Last year, he sought to remove a constitutional provision that forbids using Islamic law as a basis of legislation. Notwithstanding a threat last year that he would come to power either through "ballots or bullets," Erdogan is a tactical pragmatist willing to play the political game as gradually as necessary, convinced that time and societal trends are on his side.

The response. Thus far, the U.S. has pursued a slightly off-balance effort to mollify Erdogan, perhaps only with the short-term goal of gaining extension of OPC. Even before the Erdogan-Çiller coalition faced a parliamentary vote of confidence, the U.S. expressed satisfaction that Turkey at last had a "stable government," seemingly conferring an at-best premature U.S. stamp of approval on Erdogan and perhaps helping stem the flow of defections from Çiller's party and boost the coalition to its narrow parliamentary win. Later, the U.S. disconcerted many of its long-time Turkish friends by asserting that "secularism" is "not a condition" for U.S.-Turkish relations. A departure from longstanding U.S. public diplomacy glorifying Turkish secularism, the statement was also odd as an effort to win favor with Erdogan, who anyway purports to be a true secularist. (Aware of its misstep, the State Department last week seemingly tried to make amends by once again hailing Turkey's commitment to secularism.) To its credit, the U.S. also has sternly warned Erdogan that it would be watching "his words as well as his actions."

If trying to secure extension of OPC was the main rationale for Washington's cautious embrace of Erdogan, it is now time to alter that approach. How the U.S. decides to fine-tune its policy of support to Turkey to take into account the Erdogan factor should reflect its assessment of Erdogan's intentions and the durability of his government. If Washington is convinced Erdogan is truly the wave of the future, perhaps an argument can be made for accommodation, given Turkey's geostrategic importance. If, on the other hand, Washington believes the Erdogan regime will be short-lived and aberrational as is probably the case a less friendly policy is in order.

How durable the coalition? Probably not very. First, it holds a very narrow parliamentary majority that could unravel at any time. Second, a poor performance in office could cost Erdogan votes, as it did during his previous foray into government in the 1970s. Third, Erdogan's prospects beyond the life of this government are probably overrated at least in the near term. True, there are many reasons for Erdogan to look to the long-term future with optimism: his party's wealth, grass-roots organizing skills, and relative success in running Turkey's major cities in an efficient and non-corrupt manner; the seemingly growing religious consciousness of Turkish society; and the squabbling and ineptitude displayed by Turkey's secular politicians. Nevertheless, Erdogan's current prospects should not be exaggerated. Although he won a slight plurality in 1995 parliamentary elections, with 21.4 percent in a crowded field, his achievement of power is more the result of coalition politics and a fluke combination of circumstances an electoral oddity in which a dead-heat for second place in the elections left no natural leader for a secular coalition, and secularist Çiller's problems with corruption charges than of widespread support. A polarizing figure, Erdogan is the second choice of very few Turks; had the 1995 vote been a direct election requiring a second-round majority, Erdogan would have lost in a landslide to any of the major secular party leaders. Erdogan has come to office through democratic procedures, but he lacks a meaningful democratic mandate. The prescription. Since bedrock Turkish policies (NATO, U.S. defense ties) appear to be on track for now, only fine-tuning not major overhaul of U.S. policy is needed. This approach can be capsulized in three basic principles:

1) Turkey an ally, Erdogan no friend. The U.S. should maintain a business-as-usual approach to Turkey on all issues that affect state-to-state relations. However, nothing should be done to suggest warmth for or solicitude to this particular government, and its leader should be kept at arm's length. For example, Erdogan should not be granted an official visit or a meeting with President Clinton if he requests one, as he is likely to. Friendly photo ops should be kept to a minimum. Intervention on Turkey's behalf (with the European Union or International Monetary Fund, for example) that would redound to Erdogan's political credit should be avoided. Most important, there should be no special concessions for Turkey that Erdogan can parlay into political gains. At this point, it appears Washington has followed this minimal-concessions approach in the bargaining over OPC; Erdogan's claim that the U.S. will support a special Turkish exemption from anti-Iraq sanctions appears to be erroneous.

2) Don't undermine real friends. The secular pro-Western establishment, including the military, are Washington's best friends in Turkey. The U.S. should say or do nothing further to demoralize that uneasy group of supporters. Rhetorical support for secularism which anyway is an inseparable element of democracy should be re-affirmed and resume its long-time place in U.S. public diplomacy about Turkey.

3) Hold Erdogan to standards expected from a Western ally. Translated, the State Department's warning that it would watch Erdogan's words as well as actions presumably means the U.S. will not overlook traditional Erdogan rhetoric about, for example, U.S. "imperialism," Jewish perfidy, or Zionist plots. The U.S. should not hesitate to enforce this approach, publicly calling attention to and countering any inappropriate statements. Erdogan should be made aware that his traditional style of discourse is both distasteful and counter-productive. Coming from a head of government, not an opposition leader, Erdogan-style rhetoric could inflame unstable situations in the region particularly as it often reflects an infidel-vs.-Muslim world-view and alienate those Americans and Europeans who traditionally view Turkey as a full-fledged Western state and the great liberal democratic hope of the Muslim world.

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