

The Future of Turkish Democracy

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Articles & Testimony

Dr. Cagaptay discusses how the United States can encourage Turkey's reorientation toward Europe as the two countries work together on the ISIS/IS threat and other issues.

The following are Dr. Cagaptay's prepared remarks before the House Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats. [Watch video of the entire hearing \(http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-future-turkish-democracy\)](http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-future-turkish-democracy).

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for giving me the opportunity to testify on developments in Turkey and their implications for U.S. policy. Turkey, a NATO member state, is an important ally for to the United States. It borders vital U.S. interests in Ukraine, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and acts as a key partner for Washington in regard to each of these countries. With these developments in mind, Turkey's long term stability matters to the United States.

In the past decade, Turkey has outperformed its neighbors, rising as a stable and wealthy nation. While all of their neighbors experienced economic meltdown, political instability, and some even war, the Turks have enjoyed a decade of unprecedented growth. Turkey is now in a prime position to become an even more important ally to the United States given its robust economy.

As I describe in my recent monograph, *The Rise of Turkey* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>), the country has now become a majority middle-class society. This has yielded impressive results: Turkey is on the cusp of becoming the first large Muslim-majority society to attain universal literacy. Economic development has connected the Turkish people to the rest of the world in ways that cannot be reversed.

Equally comforting are improvements in religious freedoms, especially for non-Muslim communities. Property belonging to church and synagogue foundations, confiscated by the government in the twentieth century, has been

returned to their owners. Some historic sanctuaries closed since the end of the Ottoman Empire, such as the Greek Orthodox Sumela Monastery and Gregorian Armenian Akdamar Church, have been reopened for services. Artuklu University in southern Turkey teaches Hebrew as well as Syriac-Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke.

For these key accomplishments, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, deserve credit.

However, there is also a less bright side to the AKP's legacy. Under the party, Turkey has become more prosperous, but ironically, at the same time, also less free. When the party took power in 2002, Turkey's record on liberties, as measured by international indices, improved along with the country's ambitious work to qualify for European Union accession. Later under the AKP, Turkey's record on liberties stagnated, subsequently taking a nose dive.

For example, according to Freedom House, in 2001 before the AKP, Turkey ranked 58 out of 100 in terms of press freedom, 100 being the least free and 0 being the most free. In 2005, this score improved to 48. But later, it started to decline, dropping to 62 in 2013. Turkey under the AKP is worse off than before when it comes to press and other freedoms.

Despite being elected through a democratic process, the AKP has governed in an authoritarian manner. The party has made a habit of quashing any opposition, most prominently during the 2013 Gezi Park rallies, where police used tear gas and water cannons on protestors. The recent Twitter and YouTube ban is the latest example of the AKP's propensity for curbing basic freedoms.

A second alarming issue concerning the United States has been Turkey's pivot to the Middle East, which has met serious challenges. Before the AKP, the Turks thought of themselves as a European country situated next to the Middle East. Toward the end of the last decade, Ankara decided that the path to greater power and influence was through the Middle East rather than Europe.

This has turned out to be a miscalculation. With the exception of the Kurds, Turkey currently has no allies in the Middle East. What is more, the country is flanked by enemies, ranging from the Assad regime to the "Islamic State" (IS), as well as brutal competitors such as Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Among the many problems with Turkey's Middle East policy, the IS poses the gravest threat. It wants to establish a Taliban-like state across Turkey's 800-mile-long border with Iraq and Syria. Nobody wants the Taliban as a neighbor or its presence in the Middle East. Ankara, Washington, and NATO need each other to combat this threat. Their cooperation will cement a strong U.S.-Turkey relationship in years to come because what is in Turkey's interest is in the U.S. interest.

The Turkish prime minister has a personal stake in eradicating the IS as well. Mr. Erdogan wins elections because Turkey grows, and the country grows because it attracts international investment. Chaos next door will dry up money flowing to Turkey, ending Mr. Erdogan's successful run in elections.

The emergence of the IS offers green shoots even for the future of Turkish-Israeli ties. Across Turkey's southern border, the IS has cut the country off from its Middle Eastern markets. To circumvent this, Turkish companies now ship their goods to the Israeli port of Haifa, where Jordanian truck drivers take them across the Middle East, through Saudi Arabia to the Persian Gulf. This has reminded the Turks of the need to cooperate with the Israelis, including on Eastern Mediterranean gas deposits and combatting the IS.

There are other reasons to be optimistic about Turkey's future: the middle class, which has grown as a result of the AKP's economic policies, is committed to individual freedoms and is now challenging the party's style of governance.

The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) is slowly but surely becoming a liberal movement. Recently, the State Department honored party deputy Safak Pavey with an International Women of Courage Award,

recognizing the CHP's commitment to gender equality and democratic values.

Turkey's trajectory points toward democracy and makes its accession into the EU an attractive prospect. For years, the Turks aspired to join the union hoping it would make their country richer and more democratic. Turkey is already wealthy thanks to the AKP, and the lure of the EU to attain prosperity is no longer there. But just as Europe needs Turkey as a buffer against Middle Eastern instability, the Turkish people need the EU to drive further democratic reform at home.

U.S. policy should encourage Turkish reorientation toward Europe. We stand at an opportune moment regarding such a pivot. The AKP's drive to transform Turkey into a Middle Eastern power has failed, and the Turks feel burnt out from such efforts.

This became clearer when the IS attacked the Turkish consulate in Mosul on June 11, taking 49 Turkish citizens, including children, hostage. To date, Ankara has not been able to secure the release of its citizens. This is the largest hostage crisis in Turkey's history.

The IS threat has caused many Turks to clamor for the day when their country stayed out of the Middle East and looked to Europe. Washington should capitalize on this, relying on Turkey in the fight against the IS while promoting the country's repositioning toward Europe.

A European Turkey is not only a U.S. interest, but also an interest of Mr. Erdogan. Nearly 80 percent of the foreign investment that flows into Turkey, fueling Mr. Erdogan's electoral victories, comes from the EU. Europeans invest in Turkey because they believe Ankara will maintain its connections with the continent. Turkey's leaders surely appreciate the wisdom of their country's European vocation.

Failing to consolidate power in the Middle East, Ankara needs to re-embrace the EU and its democratic values. The Middle East may not have panned out the way it hoped, but Turkey can still be a major player -- a major European player.

Turkey is of vital interest to Europe, and in turn the United States. Its location and proclivity to capitalism and democracy make it an important ally. The developments facing Europe and the Middle East may have pushed Turkey from the forefront of the news, but it must not be forgotten. Washington and Ankara share interests, and Turkey's path will have great strategic importance to the United States in situations ranging from Ukraine to Iraq and Syria for years to come.

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