

# How to Make Turks Your Friends, or Enemies

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Oct 7, 2011

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

---

## Turks judge the world through the prism of the PKK.

**T**he cardinal rule of Turkish foreign policy is straightforward: Turks love countries that help them against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and despise those perceived as aiding it. It is that simple, really: Turks judge the world through the "PKK prism."

After Ankara captured the PKK's erstwhile leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, the party ceased to be a major threat for some years, leading the Turks to abandon the PKK prism. However, with the recent spike in PKK attacks (since June, the PKK has killed 73 people), the PKK prism is once again formatting the Turks' weltanschauung.

Countries desiring Turkey's friendship would be best served by helping it against the PKK; in this regard, the perception of what a state does regarding the PKK matters, as much as facts on the ground.

Take, for instance, Washington's dilemma. The United States has provided Turkey with the most assistance against the PKK. Washington designated the PKK a terrorist entity in 1997 and, more importantly, helped Turkey capture Ocalan in 1999. What's more, the U.S. provides Turkey with intelligence support against the group.

Yet if you ask a Turk about Washington's PKK policy, he will tell you that the U.S. is helping the PKK. This distorted view was largely formed at the beginning of the Iraq War. At that time, Washington was too busy fighting the Iraqi insurgency to devote resources to combating the PKK presence in northern Iraq. Subsequent PKK terror attacks launched into Turkey from Iraq led the Turks to jump to the premature conclusion that Washington, by not preventing PKK attacks, was supporting the organization.

In 2007, after quelling the Iraqi insurgency, Washington started providing Turkey with more intelligence against the PKK's attacks emanating from Iraq, but it was already too late. The PKK prism had already taken its toll.

The U.S. needs to make its assistance to Turkey against the PKK, including thus far unreported aspects of such aid, the bedrock of its public diplomacy outreach to the Turks.

Washington also needs Turkish elites to give credit for supporting Turkey against the PKK. This is key; once negative views of a country form due to the PKK prism, the Turks do not seem to care much what the accused says.

Taking lessons from the United States, other countries should be proactive in preventing the PKK prism from shaping the way the Turks view them.

Take Germany, for instance. Recent allegations that German NGOs and even the government itself might be funneling funds to the PKK will poison Turkish views against it if this issue is not tackled now. As the American experience shows, once allegations of support for the PKK emerge, countries are guilty until proven innocent. This is Germany's current dilemma in Turkey.

A similar dilemma exists for Israel: Following the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli ties, allegations have emerged in Turkey that Israel supports the PKK. The Israelis not only need to prove that such allegations are groundless, but also recruit the support of Turkish policymakers to say the opposite -- two tough tasks.

Interestingly, Syria also has much to fear from the PKK prism. In fact, Damascus could suffer devastating consequences from it. Although Syria hosted the PKK for years, that support ended when Turkey threatened Syria with war in the late 1990s. Syria indeed stopped harboring the PKK and the two countries became good friends.

Today, though, Turkish-Syrian ties are souring once again. Ankara fiercely opposes President Bashar al-Assad for his brutal crackdown on demonstrators. Should al-Assad decide to recycle the PKK card now, it would invite a tough Turkish reaction -- perhaps even military action -- that would put an end to the al-Assad regime's brutality as well as its PKK policy.

Turkey is not that complicated, after all: aid Turkey against the PKK and you become its best friend. Allow perceptions of support for the PKK to build and you invite Turkey's wrath.

*Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.* ❖

*Hurriyet Daily News*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



**BRIEF ANALYSIS**

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)