

The AKP's Turkey: Asset or Liability for the United States?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay/), [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh/)

Jun 11, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh/)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On June 10, 2011, Robert Wexler and Soner Cagaptay addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute, moderated by Institute managing director Michael Singh. Mr. Wexler is a former seven-term congressman as well as cofounder and former cochair of the Congressional Caucus on Turkey and Turkish Americans. Dr. Cagaptay is director of the Institute's Turkish Research Program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MICHAEL SINGH

Turkey's June 12 parliamentary elections will have important implications for the United States. Given the ongoing turmoil in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere in the region, now is an appropriate time to discuss what a third term for Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) will mean for U.S. foreign policy. President Obama came into office seeking a strong relationship with Turkey, and although the two countries have increasingly found themselves at odds over issues such as Ankara's reluctance to support NATO missions, the election of a new parliament presents the chance for policy shifts.

ROBERT WEXLER

Turkey is an extraordinary U.S. ally -- evidence abounds for this fact, including Ankara's unrivaled assistance in Afghanistan, increased support in Iraq, and high degree of cooperation on issues such as the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party. Turkey is an asset for the United States, and the United States is an asset for Turkey.

As Turkish democracy evolves, however, it will increasingly represent the views of the Turkish people rather than U.S. interests. And the two countries' divergence on several key issues cannot be ignored. For example, the AKP and Washington view Hamas, the 2010 Gaza flotilla, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in fundamentally different terms. The flotilla incident in particular was the culmination of inflammatory and counterproductive actions by the Turkish

government rather than a purely humanitarian mission.

Repairing Turkish-Israeli relations is of crucial importance to the United States. As chaotic as the Arab Spring has been, the dust will eventually settle. Once it does, Washington, Ankara, and Israel will have an opportunity to foster cooperation and rapprochement by helping to establish stability.

Regarding Turkish domestic politics, both the ruling AKP and the opposition parties have changed significantly. After the AKP came to power in 2002, the party defined itself against the intensely vitriolic and anti-American Republican People's Party (CHP) for the next five years. More recently, however, the CHP has reformed and redefined itself with liberal ideals, so now the AKP will have to define itself against liberalism. Accordingly, new electoral gains by opposition parties would bode well for U.S.-Turkish relations.

More generally, the future holds promise for Turkish cooperation with the United States, and even with Israel. In particular, if Washington hopes to stabilize Syria and remove it from Iran's orbit, this cooperation will be indispensable. Should events spiral out of control in Syria, the effects are certain to spill over into Iran -- another area in which Turkey would be an essential U.S. partner. Finally, if NATO moves its headquarters or missile defense system to Turkey, it could help ensure Ankara's commitment to the West.

SONER CAGAPTAY

During the past decade of AKP rule, Ankara's view of its role in international politics has changed, and this shift has profoundly affected its foreign policy. Whereas Turkish policymakers previously saw their country as a Muslim nation rooted firmly in the West, they now see it as a Muslim country that can talk to the West, but not as a Western country per se.

Turkey also sees itself as a regional leader that knows what is best for the Middle East and wants to be consulted before the United States takes any action there. Its perception of NATO has therefore become overwhelmingly negative -- a sentiment that the alliance can mitigate by moving some assets to Turkey, which would show Ankara that NATO works in its interest. Indeed, how Turkey views itself and what it wants from the West are important considerations that should form the basis of U.S. policy toward the country.

Regarding the June 12 elections, the campaign season has been marked by an unintended consequence of the Ergenekon case, which began in 2007 when allegations surfaced of a conspiracy against the government. The still-unresolved case has resulted in Turkey becoming the land of conspiracies. And with a sex-tape controversy rocking the opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP), it has also become obvious that the people's right to privacy can be violated with impunity, and that no one is safe from wiretaps.

Also at stake in this election is the drafting of a new constitution. The AKP will gain sole control over that process if it wins two-thirds of the seats in the legislature -- which it can certainly do if the MHP fails to gain seats due to the sex-tape scandal. Otherwise the new charter will be created through collaboration between the various parties -- a scenario that would de-polarize Turkish politics.

The AKP won in 2002 because it touted the political goal of EU accession. And it won in 2007 by touting democratization as an alternative to military and judicial control of the government. This year, however, the party is proposing physical construction projects instead of new political goals. The CHP has become the party to promote political goals such as EU accession, improved gender equality, and increased liberties for all Turks.

As for what shape Turkey's foreign policy will take after the elections, it is best viewed along a spectrum of four categories ranging from most cooperative to least cooperative. First, continued U.S.-Turkish cooperation will be easiest in Iraq and Afghanistan. The second category -- manageable differences -- includes Libya, Syria, and other Arab countries experiencing uprisings. If Turkey digresses from U.S. interests in those arenas, the White House can

step in. Although Ankara's cooperation will not be automatic, it will be attainable. The third category -- partial cooperation -- concerns recurring problems such as Iran. Turkey will likely support UN sanctions against Iran, but it will not support individual U.S. or EU sanctions.

The fourth category comprises unbridgeable differences. Two examples of this are Turkish-Israeli ties and EU accession. Although Turkish, U.S., and Israeli diplomats are working hard to repair the bilateral relationship, differences will persist because of the AKP's overarching view of the peace process: namely, that there is no Israeli-Palestinian problem, but rather that Israel itself is the problem. And while Washington has made Turkey's EU membership a priority, Ankara does not share that outlook. No country has ever joined the EU without first making accession its top foreign policy priority; indeed, French and German politicians will not change their minds about Turkey until Ankara makes membership its main goal. Given the AKP's weak commitment to liberal democratic values and preoccupation with non-European neighbors, it will not commit to accession anytime soon.

Other issues could also come between Washington and Ankara as new events arise in the region, and each will either be managed successfully or turn into a crisis. NATO involvement in Muslim-majority countries is the most likely cause of such problems. The AKP will automatically take issue with any such involvement because it sees itself as the leader of a politically defined "Muslim world" vis-a-vis the West. As mentioned previously, the best way to handle this friction is to move more NATO assets to Turkey and create new, powerful, and public connections between the alliance and Ankara, preempting any kneejerk anti-NATO reactions. In this regard, making good on the recent announcement that NATO will move its land-force headquarters from Spain to Turkey would go a long way toward countering recent tiffs between Ankara and NATO.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Eva Outzen. ❖

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

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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