

Regenerating U.S.-Turkish Relations in 2011

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Articles & Testimony

Strong U.S.-Turkish relations are not to be taken for granted, at least while the Justice and Development Party (AKP) remains in power. So, how is the U.S. to meet the dual challenge of the AKP's increasingly ideological foreign policy agenda and parallel Turkish anti-Americanism?

The controversial trajectory of Turkish foreign policy in the past eight years, not to mention the concurrent decline in Turkish public perceptions of the U.S., has shown that strong U.S.-Turkish relations are not to be taken for granted, at least while the Justice and Development Party (AKP) remains in power. So, how is the U.S. to meet the dual challenge of the AKP's increasingly ideological foreign policy agenda and parallel Turkish anti-Americanism?

It is no secret that the Turkey of today is becoming increasingly disparate from the Turkey of ten years ago, especially from the perspective of the U.S. The economy, once stagnant and prone to hyperinflation, is currently booming with a growth rate that nearly tops the G20, liberalized trade, and an unprecedented stable currency. The military, at one point a constant meddler in the affairs of the state, has been effectively expunged from the political realm. Furthermore, the military-authored constitution of 1982 was finally reformed via referendum, with provisions that allegedly enhance the nation's democracy. All of these factors seem to point to a Turkey that is modernizing and moving forward in the fashion the U.S. has always envisioned for it and consistently encouraged.

Upon further examination, however, the new profile Turkey is establishing for itself under the guidance of the AKP is far from reason to celebrate; it has actually come to present a potential challenge for U.S. interests in the Middle East

and Eurasia.

First of all, regardless of any perceived positive shift on the domestic front, the Turkish government's actions in the international realm, ranging from its selective rapprochement with the Middle East to its more high-profile disagreements with the U.S. and Israel on issues like Iran, have cast suspicion on the AKP's intentions regarding Turkey's role in the traditional transatlantic alliance.

Second, Turkey's domestic transformation of sorts, though positive in some ways, has not led it to become a stronger liberal democracy. As Turkey's steady decline on indices measuring media freedom and gender equality and politicization of the judiciary demonstrate, civilianization does not ipso facto translate to democratization or liberalization. Furthermore, anti-Americanism has become almost structural within the Turkish population, both caused by and acted upon in no small part by the AKP's rhetoric surrounding its foreign policy.

The AKP's Genealogy

The AKP's current elite can trace their political roots directly to the Virtue (Fazilet) Party, led by the polarizing Necmettin Erbakan, and the Welfare (Refah) Party, which was a springboard of sorts for Turkish Islamists dating back to the 1980s. These parties promoted an openly Islamist, deeply conservative, anti-Western, and anti-business agenda, and never truly gained any mainstream popularity. The progressive factions within these parties, however, eventually broke off and formed the Justice and Development Party (AKP) with the intention of adapting their Islamist worldview to a more center-right nationalist-conservative framework -- a move that, coupled with the dearth of credible centrist parties in the post-economic crisis period, led the AKP to satisfy a huge political demand and alter the course of Turkish politics for some time to come.

The AKP presented itself fundamentally as a party of moderates with an unparalleled openness to the wide diversity of Turkish interests -- both men and women, the devout working class, businessmen, Islamists, secular liberals, and certain strands of nationalists. The party adopted a pro-EU and pro-business stance, enhancing the rule of law and opening the economy to much fanfare. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan even seemed prepared to tackle the age-old Kurdish and Armenian issues. At this point Washington began considering Turkey a successful regional model for combining democracy and Islamism. Nevertheless, the AKP elite continued to maintain its ties, albeit in a low-key manner, with the rank and file of its ideological predecessors, Fazilet and Refah.

Opportunity and Ideology -- Turkey on the Move

Though the fissure in U.S.-Turkish relations began with the 2003 parliamentary rejection of U.S. military access to Turkish land in order to invade Iraq from the north, and was exacerbated by the AKP leadership's hosting of Hamas military leader Khaled Mashal in Ankara in 2006 despite pressure from both the U.S. and the EU, it began to widen after the elections of 2007. Riding a wave of popularity that stemmed from the flourishing economy and a timely public backlash against the military's online publication of an anti-AKP statement, the AKP managed to increase its parliamentary majority. What has emerged in the years since is a clear and systematic foreign policy orientation towards the Middle East -- at the expense of the West.

Some analysts have described the AKP's foreign policy approach as a "zero problems with neighbors" approach. Indeed, the AKP has eliminated problems and built strong ties with neighbors such as Russia, Syria, and Iran, as well as with the new Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government. Even preliminary advances towards a thaw with Armenia have even been made.

Yet Turkey's current diplomatic environment suggests otherwise. Ankara's traditionally good ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan have deteriorated beyond recognition. Turkish-Israeli relations are at an all time low, following the AKP's decision to assume the position of moral arbiter for the Palestinian -- and especially Hamas' -- cause, subsequent criticism of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, and ex post facto sponsorship of the Gaza flotilla. All of this is

not to mention, of course, the fact that Turkey's obstinate meddling in the Iranian nuclear issue and persistence on maintaining strong economic ties with Iran has proven deleterious to its relationship with the U.S. Ankara's foreign policy approach, if anything, has not been one of "zero problems."

In addition to the highly publicized and singularly controversial points of tensions between Turkey and the West -- the 'no' vote on United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions on Iran, Erdogan's scathing and at times ad hominem criticisms of Israeli treatment of Palestinians, the AKP's collective uproar in the aftermath of the flotilla incident all come to mind -- Turkey has been quietly pursuing an entirely a-Western foreign policy behind the scenes. A study of high-level visits by AKP officials reveals that the party focuses asymmetrically on anti-Western Arab countries, while ignoring Israel, most of the Balkans, and the Caucasus. Between November 2002 and April 2009, Turkish foreign ministers made at least eight visits to Iran and Syria, but only one each to Azerbaijan and Georgia. During the same period, Turkish prime ministers made at least seven visits to Qatar and Saudi Arabia but only two to Greece and Bulgaria, Turkey's most immediate European and Balkan neighbors.

It is important to highlight the absence of the EU accession process on the AKP's concrete agenda. An end about which the party was unwaveringly enthusiastic until candidacy was granted in late 2005, EU accession seems to have gradually exhausted its utility for the government -- no surprise considering it is generally after candidacy is granted that the toughest reforms are required of the nation seeking membership. In essence, the AKP has deemed the EU a tactical end -- good insofar as it is useful for, say, popular support or legally weakening the military (the primary threat to the AKP's rule) -- rather than a strategic end -- good insofar as it is representative of Turkey's aspirations as a pluralistic, liberal, and democratic nation. In any case, the AKP's indifference to the EU is alarming as it represents, both symbolically and concretely, Turkey's goal since its founding to become a modern Western liberal democracy. In the post-9/11 world, where al-Qaeda is pursuing a war between a politically charged "Muslim world" and the West, Turkey no longer has the conceptual space to be Western or European and not in the EU.

Mutual Interest, Mutual Respect?

Until recently, stemming mostly from the aforementioned optimism for an AKP-led Turkey's potential to be a beacon of both moderate Islam and liberal democracy in a volatile and authoritarian region, U.S. administrations have interpreted Ankara's increasingly confrontational actions towards the West as aberrant rather than coherent. As such, the Obama administration has thus far chosen high-level engagement and emphasized "mutual interest and mutual respect," confident that the AKP political elite would somehow 'come around' and identify with Western interests on a consistent basis once again. This approach, however, has failed to alter the actions of the AKP to any notable degree. President Obama's April 6, 2009 speech in Ankara in which he stated his commitment to "renewing the alliance between our nations and the friendship between our people" evidently fell on deaf ears, as in the following year the AKP voted against the U.S. on UNSC Iran sanctions and handled the Gaza flotilla incident in a provocative and unproductive way.

The most effective change that could alter Turkey's current foreign policy course will have to occur at the ballot box, with the next elections scheduled for July 2011. Lingering economic worries and spikes in PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party) terrorism have caused support for the AKP to decline somewhat, though such changes are usually insignificant and short-lived. A more substantive reason for optimism is the renewed Republican People's Party (CHP) and its leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who has lead efforts to rejuvenate the party by replacing the old cadres with a younger, more diverse group and altering the party's message to be more inclusive and results-oriented. One spring 2010 poll even showed the CHP pulling ahead of the AKP for the first time since 2002.

However, as the November constitutional referendum -- in which people voted primarily along party lines -- indicates, the CHP still has some way to go before it can mount a successful opposition campaign. The most

important factor behind the AKP's imminent reelection, however, is the stability and strength of the economy. For a nation used to an economy characterized by frequent crises and traumatic fluctuations in prices and inflation, a lack of economic crisis for ten years -- let alone a strong currency, robust market, and GDP growth rate reaching as high as 11 percent -- is tremendously important and will inevitably be causally tied to the incumbent government.

In any case, in the aftermath of the likely case that the AKP wins reelection, one can expect its leaders to continue to tap into popular sources of anti-Western resentment and fuel conspiracy theories directed at the U.S. and Israel -- and thereby solidify the tacit support needed to continue reorienting Turkey strategically and ideologically away from the West. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that Ankara remains responsive to U.S. ire, as demonstrated by the fallout from the UNSC Iran vote. In that case, Ankara offered some symbolic signals of contrition and pullback, such as scaling-down its language on Israel and sending a high-level ministry delegation to Washington to mend fences. While such symbolic gestures are helpful, they do not indicate a disposition to return to the status quo ante in Turkey's foreign policy. Therefore, the U.S. must find ways to express its displeasure with Ankara while doing more to pull Turkey as a nation closer to the West.

Diplomatic Toolbox

One avenue is the pursuit of a complementary policy of using strategic public diplomacy to win over individual Turks, while more pointedly employing traditional diplomatic tools with the Turkish government. During this process though, it must proceed cautiously so as not to give the AKP ammunition to breed further anti-American sentiment in Turkey.

To combat structural anti-Americanism, the U.S. must reach out to the Turkish public and build a relationship with the population, while strengthening civil society institutions for a healthier democracy. Such an effort would require a massive, Turkey-only public diplomacy initiative with devoted funding. The primary reason for this measure is that the vast majority of Turks (those that live outside Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir) know only Turkish, are highly susceptible to conspiracy theories due to past Western meddling with Ottoman affairs, and thus are highly insular in their worldviews. Country-specific exchange programs for Turkish journalists, scholars, rising politicians, opinion makers, and students from non-elite schools can alleviate at least some of the deep-seated suspicion Turks generally have about the U.S.

Another measure could include increasing the number of senior-level visits and broadening them beyond the security sphere, including areas of commerce, energy, and tourism. Direct interaction between the U.S. ambassador and the Turkish media would also eliminate a significant communicative impediment between the U.S. government and the Turkish public, and limit the extent to which media outlets can sensationalize U.S. officials' comments.

The U.S. should also attempt to resituate Turkey within the context of the EU. This plan does not only entail that U.S. officials emphasize the importance of Turkey for the EU and vice versa to Turkish and EU bureaucrats, but that the U.S. removes Turkey from Middle East diplomacy (at least as a mouthpiece for Islamist causes), by preventing it from playing mediatory roles in such controversial issues as Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The entire burden of change does not lay solely with the U.S., however. The U.S. should make clear privately and publicly that it is displeased with Ankara's freelancing. If the AKP fails to get the message, then Washington should subtly downgrade its contact with Turkey's leadership and ensure that its ambassadorial interactions and official visits remain diverse, including public meetings with the opposition. Inviting opposition figures to Washington for high-profile meetings would be beneficial in this respect. On the military front, the United States should quietly but noticeably explore alternatives to Incirlik Air Base, given the persistent friction that has characterized bilateral negotiations over leasing rights. And internationally, the United States could become more reticent regarding Ankara's efforts to secure prominent roles within the UN or similar organizations.

Other creative uses of leverage could help encourage Turkey to consider who its true friends are. For example, although the bloom may be off the EU rose for many Turks, Europe remains a locomotive for their economy given the customs union the EU established with Ankara. The United States, working with the EU, could find subtle ways to remind Turks of the benefits of the relationship. Turkey is not yet lost to the West. But one surefire way of producing that outcome is allowing U.S. politicians or diplomats to browbeat Turkish politicians or policy, whether publicly or privately. For example, efforts to aggressively push congressional resolutions on the "Armenian Genocide" merely play to Erdogan's strengths as a political alchemist, turning U.S. anger into domestic political gold. Instead, the United States must develop a more nuanced policy aimed at scaling back the AKP's influence and developing a real defense against its policies. The alternative -- a policy that targets the whole of Turkey with measures such as passing the Armenian resolution or blocking military sales -- would only push the Turks away from the United States, fulfilling the AKP's objective. In other words, the question of what to do with Turkey is partly predicated on the question of what not to do with Turkey. Given the AKP's strategy of rallying Turkish public opinion behind its anti-Western foreign policy, the cardinal rule of the new era is simple: do no harm, meaning do not offend the Turks or the Turkish Republic.

Blocking military sales to Turkey, for instance, would not help the United States confront the AKP, but would bring the secular and non-AKP components of Turkish society into the AKP's fold. This rule holds even for highly charged issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That is, confronting the AKP frontally on its support for Hamas prior to the 2011 elections would likely backfire. Exercising "smart power" will require subtlety and nuance, and the United States is capable of both. At the same time, the United States must signal to Ankara that its anti-Western policies have a cost. To this end, Washington should withhold U.S. political access from the AKP; this would cost the party prestige that matters greatly in Turkish politics. So far, AKP leaders have been invited to Washington even as they transgressed U.S. policy in multiple areas, creating the impression that Washington either approves of AKP policies or considers the party indispensable to U.S. foreign interests. Granting meetings and face-time to representatives of foreign governments and institutions is a useful component of U.S. power, one that can be leveraged by denying the AKP such access while maintaining bureaucratic contacts. At the very least, this policy might highlight the party's current anti-Western orientation while encouraging the Turkish opposition.

Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations

The AKP's years in power have coincided with a sharp deterioration in U.S.-Turkish relations. Although both sides have contributed to this decline, the AKP's disturbing shift in foreign policy -- particularly with regard to the Middle East -- has spurred deepening concern in Washington over the future direction of Turkey as a whole. Such concerns can no longer be marginalized by U.S. policymakers. The United States remains the most powerful country in the world and should encourage Turkey to consider both the benefits of having Washington in its corner and the costs of rejecting U.S. support. The overall effort is worth it -- an alliance backed by decades of hard work, cooperation, and goodwill is at stake.

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