

Why Turkey Needs a New Foreign Policy

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Brief Analysis

On March 28, 2010, Robert Satloff, Osman Koruturk, and Soner Cagaptay addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss the foreign policy views of Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP). Dr. Satloff is the Institute's executive director. Ambassador Koruturk is the CHP's vice chairman for international relations. Dr. Cagaptay is director of the Institute's Turkish Research Program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ROBERT SATLOFF

Turkey is vital to promoting peace, stability, and security in the broader Middle East. Given the growing doubts regarding U.S.-Turkish relations, it is both timely and appropriate to discuss the new foreign policy perspective being voiced by the country's main opposition. The Republican People's Party is the oldest governing party in Turkey and the faction that established the modern U.S.-Turkish relationship in the first place. Yet the depth and strength of that relationship has been put into question by Ankara's recent actions, ranging from opposition to last year's UN Security Council resolution on Iran to disagreements over the nature and conduct of operations in Libya.

OSMAN KORUTURK

In its first formal visit to the United States, the CHP delegation aims to introduce the party's vision of a "new Turkey." The delegation has already presented the new elements of its foreign policy in visits to Brussels, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Over the past six months, the CHP has sought to emphasize its new identity as a progressive, social democratic party that is open to the world.

The party considers restoring U.S.-Turkish relations as one of its foreign policy priorities. The CHP seeks the establishment of a new and modern partnership with the United States based on equality, mutual respect, and protecting each other's lawful interests. The party intends to enlarge the scope of bilateral relations from mainly

strategic and defense-oriented projects to larger commercial and economic ventures, including green energy.

Since 2002, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has followed a foreign policy of its own, ignoring differing opinions emanating from Turkish society. This policy -- which has often diverged from the Euro-Atlantic community -- is unrealistic and has not produced positive results. The CHP's foreign policy is guided by democracy, human rights, secularism, supremacy of law, development, social justice, and gender equality. In the CHP's view, foreign policy requires contributions from all circles of society and should be based on sustainable national consensus.

How to Put Turkey Back in the West

The CHP maintains that regional and international organizations are both necessary and beneficial in the resolution of international disputes. Similarly, partaking in the peace and security operations of the UN, NATO, and other relevant institutions is a must for Turkey. The CHP sees the European Union and NATO as the cornerstones of the Euro-Atlantic community, to which Turkey belongs; in contrast, the AKP does not feel at home in this community. The CHP also agrees that NATO should be strengthened in order to ensure security in the region. In the party's view, Turkey has long been an efficient member of the Euro-Atlantic community and should remain firmly in that position.

In addition, the CHP supports full EU membership and opposes the "privileged partnership" option supported by German chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Nicholas Sarkozy. The CHP strongly believes that EU candidacy needs to be prioritized -- accession talks have been stagnant under the AKP because of the party's failure to prioritize EU membership as a foreign policy goal.

In analyzing Turkey's regional role, the CHP believes that Turkey, unlike some other countries in the area, can foster greater stability by seeking peaceful initiatives. After all, Turkey is the only country with an overwhelmingly Muslim population that is Western at the same time. This unique dual identity and the valuable regional role that it ascribes to Turkey, both lost under the AKP, have to be restored. And although Turkey was previously an outpost of the Euro-Atlantic family of nations, the CHP would like to see the country standing at the heart of a Washington-Brussels-Ankara axis.

Views on the Middle East

Arab revolts. The main problem in Arab countries is the type of regimes that are imposed on the people. The CHP encourages governments based on freedom, democracy, and respect for the legitimate demands of the people. It also believes that democracy will spread in the region. Although change will likely bring in some conflicts, the CHP expects that the transitions we are witnessing today will have real positive effects in the long term.

Iran. Iran's nuclear program creates suspicions, and although Tehran argues that the program is intended for peaceful energy purposes, this claim does not satisfy the international community. The CHP advises Tehran to be more transparent on this issue and believes that Turkey is, and must remain, opposed to Iranian nuclear armament.

Libya. On February 24, the CHP stated that the Libyan people's demands for more democracy, a greater share of their country's wealth, and equal opportunities are legitimate aspirations. The Libyan government should stop using force against its population and instead find a way to enter constructive dialogue with them. The CHP maintains that the AKP should not have opposed NATO intervention, but rather discussed the issue within NATO -- as a NATO member -- in order to influence the alliance's policy toward Libya.

Israel. Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel in 1948. Recently, however, Turkey's position as a mediator in the Middle East peace process has deteriorated: Ankara is no longer a trusted ally of Israel. The CHP proposes to restructure Turkey's relations with Israel in order to work more effectively toward resolution of the

conflict. Turkish-Israeli ties are important for Israel, Turkey, and the region.

Lebanon. Before the AKP, Turkey had a longstanding policy of not interfering in inter- and intra-Arab affairs. The AKP abandoned this policy, however, with the foreign minister taking an active interest in Lebanese politics, resulting in a negative outcome. The CHP recognizes that Turkey is a non-Arab country and should not interfere in Arab conflicts. Ankara's decision to intervene in Lebanon on Hizballah's behalf -- with the foreign minister even visiting Hassan Nasrallah's bunker -- was both unsuccessful and risky.

SONER CAGAPTAY

To understand the CHP's call for a new Turkish foreign policy, one needs to look at Ankara's current foreign policy as it has emerged under the AKP over the past decade. Analysts have used different adjectives to describe this policy, such as "neo-Ottomanist," "activist," and "zero problems with neighbors." Whichever terminology one uses, however, the AKP's approach clearly lacks the leitmotiv of Turkish foreign policy in the twentieth century, and arguably even the nineteenth century. Historically, the most significant driving force of Turkish foreign policy was the principle that Turkey is not just a Muslim country, but also a Western one, and that these two attributes are not mutually exclusive.

Along these lines, what has made Turkey valuable as a Middle East mediator is not that it is a Muslim country or a country in the West, but that it is a Muslim country in the West. The AKP's politically charged foreign policy is defined by its goal to lead the Muslim world. It does not consider Turkey as part of the West -- instead, the party seeks to deal with the West on behalf of the Muslim world. This is the most significant break between AKP policy and Turkish policy of the past. And although the party's approach has resulted in successes in Iraq, it has also failed in terms of EU membership, problems with the United States, and bilateral ties with Israel.

In restructuring Turkish foreign policy, Ankara's chief priority should be EU accession. None of the current member countries have entered the union without making the accession process a priority. Yet it may be unrealistic to expect Turkish foreign policy to return to that of the pre-AKP years. After all, even if the party were no longer in power, Turkey has established new and powerful commercial and political links with countries such as Qatar, Russia, Iran, and Syria over the past decade, and vested interests will strive to keep these relations strong. Therefore, a post-AKP Turkish foreign policy is more likely to fall somewhere in between two poles -- not entirely "new" as envisioned by the CHP, and not wholly reminiscent of the AKP's approach either, but a mix of new and old.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Hale Arifagaoglu. ❖

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