

## What Should the Next Administration Expect from Turkey?

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On September 21, 2008, Soner Cagaptay and Philip Gordon addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Dr. Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at the Institute. Mr. Gordon, a senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy at the Brookings Institution, is a senior advisor to Democratic presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Soner Cagaptay

In formulating its policy toward Turkey, the next administration should make clear to Ankara that some aspects of the relationship need to be adjusted. First, the new president should show zero tolerance toward anti-American statements from Turkish officials. Just as the U.S. president would not disparage Turkey, its values, or its religion, Turkish leaders should not use such rhetoric against the United States or its values. Turkey is a rather insular country culturally and politically; less than 10 percent of its citizens are fluent in English or another European language. Consequently, they tend to follow world events through the statements of their leaders, as reported in domestic media. In addition, most Turks are fence-sitters when it comes to their relationship with the West, taking cues from their leaders regarding the future of Turkey's attachment to Europe and the United States. Hence, Turkey is a special case in the realm of anti-American rhetoric. It resembles neither Denmark (where an anti-American remark would be dismissed as crazy) nor Egypt (where a pro-Western statement would be treated in the same way) -- rather, pro- and anti-Western rhetoric alike have a role in shaping Turkish public opinion. The next administration should do what it can to ensure that Turkish officials avoid the negative rhetoric.

Second, although Turkey is in a challenging neighborhood and has every right to maintain its regional standing, this should not come at the expense of its role in Western institutions such as NATO. Because Turkey is a NATO member, the next U.S. administration can justifiably ask Ankara to prioritize its policy engagement with the United States, stay focused on its commitment to the West, and act as a true NATO ally in the region.

Third, the next president should expect the Turkish government to respect European democratic norms. Although Turkey is a predominantly Muslim country like Egypt, it is also a European democracy like Spain. Thus, politically speaking, the United States should expect from Ankara not what it expects from other Muslim governments but, rather, what it expects from other European democracies. Such expectations include setting benchmarks that would hold the Turkish government to high standards on issues such as respect for civil liberties and human rights.

Together with newly appointed U.S. ambassador James Jeffrey, the next administration should get a blank check of goodwill from the Turks -- and it would be best if the president himself went to Turkey to pick up this check. Such a visit could be part of a wider European trip, which would signal U.S. commitment to Turkey's membership in the European Union. The next administration should also consider further action against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) presence in northern Iraq, from where the group carries out terrorist attacks against Turkey. Most Turks blame the United States for allowing these attacks to continue. Enhanced U.S. cooperation against the PKK would defuse a major source of Turkish public antipathy toward the United States, particularly if coupled with pro-American statements from Turkish leaders.

For its part, Turkey deserves two things from the West: From Europe, it should receive fair treatment in its EU accession process. By meeting this need, the EU would give a clear signal that it truly considers Turkey part of "the West." Ankara should also be afforded stronger cooperation in its efforts to counter the PKK, not just from the United States, but also from Europe. Just as the West continues to support counterterrorism efforts around the globe, Turkey should receive its share in fighting the PKK. European and U.S. commitment on this front is perhaps the main litmus test of whether or not they view Turkey as Western.

Philip Gordon

A couple of overriding issues must be addressed before one can talk about what the next administration should do regarding Turkey: first, the country's importance, and second, the direction in which it is headed. It is easy to understand why Turkey is so important for the United States. It sits at an extremely important geopolitical junction, has a population of seventy million people, and boasts a developed economy with a growing gross domestic product. It is the most thoroughgoing democracy in the Muslim world, as well as a critical corridor for transporting energy resources from Russia, the Caucasus, and Iran to the West.

Yet there are two main reasons to be concerned about Turkey's current direction. First is the public's increasingly negative attitude toward the United States. Until 2003, both countries assumed that they needed each other so much that they would never abandon their strong bilateral ties. This view changed drastically with the Iraq war. Today, 91 percent of Turks view the United States unfavorably or disagree with its policies in the region. Anti-EU sentiment is increasing as well. Both the number of Turks who favor EU accession and the number who believe that Turkey will actually be granted membership have dropped. Turkey may yet remain a stable liberal partner that trades with the United States, but current trends augur that it could just as easily become a more nationalist country that resents its rejection from the EU and isolates itself from the West.

The second main reason for Washington's concern is the degree to which Turkey is polarized. Debates about the presidential elections in 2007 and, more recently, the Constitutional Court case against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) only sharpened the contrast between those who consider themselves secularists and those who consider themselves, for lack of a better term, Islamists.

Although much more could be said about the complexity of Turkey's current domestic dynamics, the recommendations for the next administration are fairly simple. First, it should not simply base its Turkey policy on a broader, grander Middle East policy. Second, the next president should emphasize U.S. support against the PKK. Since the beginning of the Iraq war, many Turks have come to believe that Washington's priority is the conflict in Iraq rather than any external PKK activities. They also feel that Americans care about only those terrorist threats that affect the United States. It is crucial to convince Turks that the United States is concerned about terrorist attacks on Turkish soil as well, and that the United States will be there to help them. Also, the next administration should not take sides in Turkish domestic affairs. Turks should pick their leaders as they see fit, and the United States should work in cooperation with that choice as long as it results from a democratic process.

In short, the next administration should make sure that Turkey stays on the right path, because it would be sad to discuss four years from now why we lost a valued ally. ❖

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