

Post-PKK Operations:

Will Turkey Change Its Attitude toward Iran and Syria?

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Articles & Testimony

Since the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, the absence of U.S. action toward the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) presence in northern Iraq has been driving a wedge between Turkey and the United States. Meanwhile, Turkey's ties with Iran and Syria, which analysts characterized as "cold if occasionally cordial" in the 1990s, have been transformed in the last years. Seeing the U.S. paralysis against the PKK as an opportunity, Tehran and Damascus have acted against the PKK, combating the group to win Turkey's heart. Accordingly, coupled with the Strategic Depth policy of the AKP (Justice and Development Party), Turkey has been promoting closer ties with its Muslim neighbors. The United States is now helping Turkey against the PKK, as it did in the 1990s, but will Turkish ties with Iran and Syria be affected? The facts suggest Turkey might well not wish to go back in time.

Turkish Foreign Policy Rationale toward Iran and Syria

Since 2003, Iran has been using the "PKK opportunity," turning against the organization which it hosted until the beginning of the Iraq war. Helped by the AKP's friendly policies toward Tehran, Iran's support for Turkey against the PKK has won Tehran the Turks' hearts. In fact however, Turkish-Iranian relations seem to be mutually opportunistic. For instance a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed in July 2007 that now ties the two countries through important energy deals. According to the MoU, Turkey will receive 30 million cubic meters of Iranian and Turkmen natural gas, easing Turkey's dependence on Russian gas.

Since 2004, Turkey has fully employed its "charm offensive," publishing millions of dollars worth of tourism ads in Iranian printed media. In 2007, Iranian visitors to Turkey increased to approximately 1 million from 400,000 in 2006. The prevalent foreign policy logic, which can be summed up by the following excerpt from a personal interview conducted in late-November is; "if 1,400,000 Iranians visit Turkey a year, become exposed to Turkish democratic experience, see that Islam, democracy and an open society can indeed work and go back to their country to share this with at least three people, will these 4,200,000 people work for or against the interest of the United States?" The rationale tackles the situation at the grassroots level, which is arguably the underbelly of the Iranian leadership. Indeed, Iran became increasingly aware of this "danger" and, according to Ihlas news agency reports, limited Turkey's advertising share in the Iranian media on Nov. 27.

On the other hand Damascus, which started to cooperate with Turkey against the PKK in 1999 when forced to do so by Ankara, now "gives Turkey whatever it wants" as a Turkish analyst commented in December 2007. Again, coupled with friendly policies followed by the AKP government, Syrian cooperation against the PKK has brought Ankara closer to Damascus than ever before since Syria was established in 1936.


The Turkish foreign policy-making elite's approach toward Syria also has an economic basis. Structured on Assad's willingness to cooperate with Turkey as a bridge away from isolation, Turkey signed a free trade agreement with Syria in early 2007. According to Turkish Institute for Statistics data, Syrian-Turkish trade reached \$1.1 billion in the first 11 months of 2007, up from \$729,000 in the same period of 2006, a 50 percent annual increase. Syrian

imports from Turkey reached \$737 million in the first 11 months of 2007 from \$550 million for the same period of 2006 (+34 percent), while exports stood at \$363 million from \$179 million for the same period of 2006 (+102 percent). As it appears, the Turkish logic is to "socialize" Syria through incorporating it into the regional market and the global order. Perhaps with a hint of Haas-ian neo-functionalism, Turkey attempts to apply the European model of positive spillover theory as this vision has proved quite fruitful so far.

Can Turkey Change Its Stance toward Iran and Syria?

Although both Turkey and the U.S. aim to mend bilateral ties, the Bush administration and the AKP appear to be playing the waiting game. To an extent, opening up Iraqi airspace and sharing satellite intelligence are indeed important steps taken by the Bush administration, however Turkish military experts, while acknowledging the good intent in these steps, argue that these measures influence operational utility minimally and rather serve as confidence building measures. Meanwhile, the AKP seems to be waiting for a possible clean slate opened by the next U.S. administration, perhaps led by a Democrat, to be able to "sell" the improvement in U.S.-Turkish relations to the Turkish public more convincingly.

In such a moment, intelligence sharing between the U.S. and Turkey or Turkish President Gul's visit to Washington in January by themselves, although welcome developments, are unlikely to change Turkey's outlook toward Iran and Syria. It should be underlined that as long as the U.S. proves again and again to be neglecting or even perceivably acting contrary to Turkey's existential policy priorities, especially on the critical issue of the PKK; it will be alienating Turkish public opinion, while narrowing the maneuvering space of the government and the foreign policy elite. This makes it costly for Turkey to disregard its regional alliance alternatives. As it stands, the Strategic Depth policy indeed appears to be giving Turkey strategic maneuvering space it would otherwise not have (as long as incidents like the Hamas visit in February 2006 can be avoided), and Turkey's current relations with Syria and Iran are the perfect mirror of U.S. attitude toward Turkey in the last years. In other words, an American policy-maker, looking at Turkey's relations with Iran and Syria, in fact sees a Turkish policy-maker looking at the U.S. attitude toward the PKK through the Iraq war.

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