

Upcoming Elections in Turkey: Implications for Ankara's Foreign Policy

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Brief Analysis

On April 16, 2007, Soner Cagaptay, Ian Lesser, and Zeyno Baran addressed a Washington Institute Special Policy Forum marking the release of Dr. Cagaptay's new Policy Focus, [Secularism and Foreign Policy in Turkey: New Elections, Troubling Trends \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=268\)](#). Dr. Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Institute. Ms. Baran is a senior fellow and director of the Center for Eurasian Policy at Hudson Institute. Dr. Lesser is senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SONER CAGAPTAY

Turkey will hold both presidential and parliamentary elections in 2007. Should the United States be concerned about who wins? Some analysts claim that the results will hold no consequences for Turkish foreign policy toward the United States, but recent events suggest otherwise.

Before Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power in 2003, a majority of Turks held favorable views of the United States. Today, however, only around 10 percent do. Although this finding can be partly attributed to the fallout from the Iraq war, the overall drop in America's favorability rating is much larger in Turkey than in other Muslim-majority countries. How and why did Turkish attitudes toward the United States drop more precipitously than in neighboring countries?

The answer lies in the foreign policy of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Turkey has traditionally identified with the West, supporting a pro-Western foreign policy in large part due to the leadership of secular Turkish parties. In contrast, the AKP has often criticized U.S. policy in the region and taken an avid interest in the causes of the Muslim Middle East, turning the public's focus toward Muslim issues and nations.

The AKP's own foreign policy has been defined by the theory of "strategic depth," which maintains that Turkey should deal equally with the West and the Muslim world. According to this view, Turkey's close ties with the former represent alienation from the latter. The fact that the AKP does not view Turkey's closeness to the West as a given constitutes a counterrevolution in Turkish foreign policy. The strategic-depth approach even encourages improved ties with countries like Iran and Syria -- suggesting, for instance, that tensions resulting from past Syrian support for

the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) are "artificial." These policy changes, coupled with harsh AKP criticism of the United States and Israel, are leading many Turks to conclude that their interests lie with other Muslim-majority countries, not the West.

In 1997, Turkey's secular bloc -- including most political parties, the military, the business community, and much of the media -- forced the AKP's predecessor, the Welfare Party (RP), from power. The AKP drew lessons from that experience, known as the "February 28" period. It now maintains popular support by generating sympathy for its foreign policy. When Turks think of themselves as Muslims first in foreign policy, they will inevitably begin to think of themselves as Muslims first in domestic policy. This phenomenon lies at the root of Turkey's growing Muslim nationalism -- an anti-Western ideology on the rise since 2002. Additionally, the AKP has provided immense growth opportunities for large businesses and maintained good relations with them. This in turn has garnered support from the Turkish media, three-fourths of which is owned by three large Istanbul businesses that have benefited from AKP initiatives.

The resultant cooling of Turkish attitudes toward the West is a risk for the United States. It not only means that bilateral ties are weakening, but also that the main anchor holding Turkey to the West is coming unmoored. Washington should be aware that if the AKP wins both elections this year, it would control the executive and legislative branches and gain tremendous influence over the judiciary by way of appointments. Such a scenario would not only erode the checks and balances of Turkish democracy, but also push Turks further away from the West. Accordingly, Washington needs to make secularism a key part of its discourse on Turkish politics. Three other measures would prove helpful as well: supporting Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU) as another key anchor to the West; considering action against the PKK in northern Iraq to persuade Turks that the United States is a committed friend; and establishing closer ties with secular Turkish parties and groups that could turn the public's focus back toward the West.

IAN LESSER

The rise of the AKP is at least partly attributable to the rise of a new class: a parallel business elite that sees its interests as being in line with the AKP's. Key constituencies with vested economic interests have been able to insulate the party from the traditionally secular military. In addition, the AKP has learned lessons from previous Islamist movements and has thus been able to hold secularists at bay.

From an American foreign policy perspective, several issues come to the forefront. First, there is no alternative preferable to the AKP -- no forward-looking secular party capable of winning the elections. In fact, there are nationalists on both the right and left who could create even bigger problems for U.S. foreign policy.

Second, a distinction needs to be made between the AKP's religious orientation and its foreign policy. In truth, the party has put most of its energy into the EU accession process. Although conflicts involving Muslims outside Turkey no doubt resonate with the AKP, the fact remains that the country has no viable economic or strategic alternative to involvement with the West. The real problem to be reckoned with is the growing trend of Turkish nationalism and its synthesis with Islamism. Nationalism is the main driver of foreign policy interests among Turks, including the elite. As evidenced by recent polling, those with nationalist sentiments are very conscious of Turkish sovereignty and opposed to the current U.S. administration.

Washington should take several actions to strengthen its relationship with Turkey. First, it needs to include Turkey in regional cooperation on Iraq. Second, it must deal with the PKK problem. Third, it should involve Turkey in active policy planning on regional issues such as Iran's nuclear program.

ZEYNO BARAN

U.S.-Turkish relations are currently facing several fundamental problems. Threat perceptions in Washington and

Ankara have diverged since the September 11 attacks. For the United States, the primary threats are Iran and terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. For Turkey, the primary threats are the PKK and the division of Iraq. Two of Turkey's most longstanding existential issues -- Kurdish separatism and Islamism -- are especially important at the moment, and Turks view the United States as being on the wrong side of both. The Turkish military and public have run out of patience on the PKK issue. As for Islamism, the United States has not made the distinction between Muslims and Islamists clear -- a distinction that is crucial to the many Muslim Turks who support secular politics. These Turks see Islamism -- including its moderate form -- as a slippery slope, and they share a disturbing sense that Washington would accept a slightly more Islamist government as long as it remained an ally.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Zeynep Eroglu. ❖

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