

Preventing Turkey's Popular Slide away from the West

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Brief Analysis

Iran's nuclear program presents one more issue on which Washington sees Middle East developments in a different light than does the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey. Since coming to power in November 2002, AKP leaders have pursued rapprochement with Damascus and enhanced dialogue with Iran. In March 2006, the AKP welcomed Hamas leaders in Ankara. It is surprising that Turkey, a traditional bastion of Western policies in the Middle East, is promoting close ties with anti-Western actors that have hurt Turkey for decades -- Syria provided safe haven to the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Iran supported the PKK and radical Islamist terrorists. Why do the Turkish people not resent such policies?

The Iraq war and the U.S. agenda for political transformation in the Middle East have clashed with the Turkish people's desire to preserve the Middle Eastern political landscape. What is more, U.S. inaction against the PKK's Qandil enclave in Northern Iraq is angering most Turks in the way Syrian and Iranian support for the PKK upset them in the 1990s. Turkish confusion and anger toward the United States stands in sharp contrast with the improved image of Syria and Iran in Turkey. Meanwhile, with AKP discussing Middle Eastern politics in terms of Islamic codes, some Turks now identify with the region through Islam and not their national identity. The challenge for Washington is to find a way to prevent Turkey's popular slide away from the United States.

Further Problems with the EU

Anti-Western sentiments in Turkey are exacerbated by problems with the European Union (EU). Even though Turkey's EU negotiations will take up to a decade and do not promise membership, objections to Turkey are already rising in the EU. In capitals such as Paris, opinionmakers are opposing Turkey's membership, describing the country as "non-European." With Cyprus, a Middle Eastern island in the EU, Turks see this argument referring not to Turkey's geography, but to its dominant Muslim faith.

An important example of Turkey being treated differently than other applicants is the EU's embrace of a French plan to introduce references to human rights, indicating Turkey's combustible Kurdish question, into the "Chapter on Education and Culture," the first of the thirty-five chapters of the Turkish-EU accession talks. While this chapter has had a technical approach to educational and cultural issues in case of previous accession countries, it is evolving into a political one for Turkey, demanding more from Ankara than from previous EU candidate states.

The problems in Turkish-EU relations will be exacerbated by the PKK's use of terror to coerce Turkey into talks. Over the past two weeks, the PKK has launched violent demonstrations in Turkey, destroying businesses that refuse its order for social strike, killing people, and firebombing public buses in Istanbul. The PKK is able to operate thanks to a vast financial, recruitment and propaganda base inside the EU. For instance, on March 31, the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* reported that the PKK's current violent initiative is being carried out with daily directives from Danish-based Roj TV. EU stipulations that "Turkey should do more on the Kurdish issue" sound insincere to Turks when PKK fronts are thriving inside Europe.

European pusillanimity against the PKK angers the wider Turkish public, especially since the Kurdish nationalist view represents a minority opinion among Turkey's Kurds. In the twelve overwhelmingly Kurdish-populated provinces in southeastern Turkey, Kurdish nationalist Democratic People's Party (DEHAP) received only 30 percent of the vote in the last elections, while in western Turkey, home to over half of Turkey's Kurds, support for DEHAP barely exceeds one percent. Even though it represents a minority opinion among Turkish Kurds, the PKK dominates the Kurdish nationalist movement, including DEHAP (now called Democratic Society Party DTP), through the elimination of any peaceful alternatives.

U.S. Options

Even if Turkey manages the oncoming crisis with the EU, an anti-EU and anti-Western backlash will nevertheless follow, with Turks blaming the EU for treating them with religious bias. With even the best-case scenario offering a bleak picture, Washington can take a number of steps to counter the erosion of Turkey's longstanding pro-Western foreign policy orientation, and even the prospect of Turkey turning into an anti-Western yet modern state, in the mold of Malaysia:

Convey to the Turkish public that Turkey's interests lie in the Western world. Through high-level meetings, the best way of getting opinions across to the Turkish elite, and through public diplomacy, Washington should tell Turks that Turkey belongs to the West and that the United States and Turkey share secular democratic values and an interest in fighting terrorism. In terms of public diplomacy efforts, eliminating the Voice of America's Turkish services, as proposed in the 2007 budget, would be dangerous at a time when al-Jazeera has plans to start a Turkish broadcast. Washington should also identify areas of common interest to convince Turkey's public of the advantages of cooperation with the United States. These include new energy transportation projects from the Caspian basin; U.S. involvement in ending Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territory, a major concern for the Turkish public; and a free trade agreement to build the economic pillar of bilateral ties and to strengthen business lobbies for better relations.

Deal with the PKK. U.S. action against the PKK is a must for winning Turkish confidence. Turkish frustration with lack of U.S. action against the PKK's Qandil enclave in Iraq has mounted in the aftermath of recent PKK violence. Even public officials and the liberal press now suggest that Washington supports the PKK. If a full-scale battle against the group is not possible before Iraq is more fully stabilized, the detention or elimination of the group's leadership in Iraq would be the best way to pacify the PKK and gain Turkish trust. As a hierarchical organization, the PKK loses its tactical abilities when it loses its leadership. That was the case in 1999 when PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured with U.S. assistance -- and thanks to Ankara giving credit to Washington for its efforts, Turkish public opinion embraced the United States as a result.

Take steps on Cyprus. The Cyprus issue ought to be taken off the table before it crashes Turkish-EU relations, damaging the anchor that ties Turkey to the West. Washington might appoint a senior diplomat with international visibility to build momentum toward a UN-supported solution of the problem. Increased political, cultural, and commercial contacts with Turkish Cypriots would undercut the confidence of the uncompromising Greek Cypriot leadership that the current stalemate can be prolonged indefinitely.

Move Turkey's EU process. Washington should continue its closed-door diplomacy to emphasize to European leaders the added value of Ankara's membership on issues such as demographics, energy, and strategic concerns. Washington could also bring to fruition ongoing collaboration with European intelligence bodies, lawmakers, and police forces against PKK structures in Europe. This step would not only disarm a vector of crisis in Turkish-EU relations, but also, when recognized by the Turkish government, improve America's standing in Turkey.

What Ankara Can Do

None of Washington's steps will work unless the Turkish government works to shape public opinion in favor of Turkey's Western orientation. Strange as it sounds, after four years of AKP rule, Turkish public opinion worries that American foreign policy constitutes a threat to Turkey; the AKP needs to forcefully counter this view. The Turkish government should lead a public discussion on U.S moves in the Middle East from the perspective of Turkish national interests, and not the interests of the country's Arab neighbors or the Muslim world, an issue on which Turks are confused. Indeed, the AKP might emphasize that by working with the United States, Turkey can shape U.S. Middle East policy to its advantage. Only these steps can shape public opinion in the long run and maintain Turkey's historic Western orientation, a path rooted in Ataturk's vision.

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