

Turkey:

Between the West and the Middle East

Jan 31, 2006



Brief Analysis

On January 24, 2006, Yigit Alpogan, secretary-general of Turkey's National Security Council, addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Ambassador Alpogan, who assumed his current post in August 2004 as the first civilian head of the Turkish National Security Council, previously served as the Turkish ambassador to Greece and Turkmenistan as well as deputy undersecretary of foreign affairs. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Relations with the West

Turkish policy toward the West consists of two basic elements: Ankara's relations with the United States, and the Turkish perspective on the European Union (EU). These elements are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are parts of the same whole. In that sense, Ankara's relations with Europe and America play an important role in the formation of wider Turkish foreign policy.

EU accession. The ongoing EU process in Turkey has spurred further political liberalization and remains an important dynamic. For example, as a result of this process, Ankara has for the first time assigned a civilian as secretary-general of the National Security Council.

Turkey is currently undergoing a screening process for each of the thirty-five chapters of its EU accession talks. Screening for six of these chapters is complete; Ankara expects to begin negotiations soon on some of these screened chapters, which touch on key areas such as science, technology, education, and culture. Going forward, Turkish accession should be treated as a purely technical process. It would be advantageous for all parties to avoid injecting any political issues into the negotiations.

Cyprus. Turkey's EU accession is completely unconnected to the Cyprus issue. In 2004, UN secretary-general Kofi Annan proffered a plan for resolving the Cyprus question. Although the subsequent April 2004 referendum on the island's unification failed, the results of the vote demonstrated a willingness among Turkish Cypriots to pursue Annan's solution. After the referendum, Turkey could have officially declared the negotiations stalled, but it chose not to. Once Greek Cyprus entered the EU as a member state, the union prepared an initiative to address the issue of Turkish Cypriot isolation in the northern part of the island. The initiative sought to ease embargos hampering trade and make EU markets more accessible to Northern Cyprus. Unfortunately, the proposal was blocked.

The latest Turkish proposal for Cyprus is aimed at normalizing life on the island, and it should be supplemented by a comprehensive solution -- an approach that Turkey has always supported. The first and second parts of this initiative address the concerns of Greek Cypriots by granting them access to Turkish seaports and airspace. The third and fourth parts address Turkish Cypriot concerns, calling for the opening of Ercan International Airport in Northern Cyprus (which would involve direct flights under Turkish Cypriot management) and the inclusion of Northern Cyprus as an economic entity in the EU customs union area. This initiative is just a prelude, however. Without a comprehensive, just, and mutually acceptable solution, the Cyprus question will persist on the

international community's agenda.

Relations with the United States. Turkey is deeply satisfied with the current state of U.S.-Turkish relations. In addition to bilateral relations, there are many other avenues for cooperation. Turkey considers NATO the core element in the transatlantic relationship. For example, 2006 will likely witness developments in Kosovo that provide opportunities for extensive U.S.-Turkish cooperation. Regarding Mediterranean security, both countries are now participating in Operation Active Endeavor against international terrorism in the region. Central Eurasia shows strong potential for cooperation as well. In the southern Caucasus, Ankara and Washington have ample opportunity to harmonize their views while promoting a vision for trans-Caspian pipeline projects, which are ever more important given today's energy security concerns. Central Asia offers additional room for cooperation given the important historic, linguistic, religious, and ethnic ties between Turkey and various Central Asian countries.

PKK. At the same time, Turkey needs to see tangible American support against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). In the absence of such support, the Turkish public remains unconvinced that Washington is truly with Turkey in the war on terror. Currently, about three to four thousand PKK terrorists are based in the Qandil Mountains at the Iraqi-Turkish border and receive logistical help from other areas in northern Iraq. Washington could greatly improve Turkish public opinion by helping to capture PKK leaders there. Such measures would also weaken agitators in Turkey who seek to harm U.S.-Turkish relations. Washington could also provide immense help on the Cyprus issue. In order to encourage Greek Cypriots, the United States could study the aforementioned Turkish initiative and, in time, work toward a more comprehensive solution.

Relations with the Middle East

Iraq. Like Washington, Turkey seeks a united, independent, democratic, and sovereign Iraq. In 2005, Iraqis went to the polls three times -- a promising development for any country with no history of democracy. Turkey supports Iraqi efforts to form a national-unity government composed of all parties. Failing that, Turkey would also be satisfied with a broad-based government capable of passing laws and acting in accordance with diplomatic procedures.

Following the formation of a government, the Iraqi constitution will likely come under revision. Of the sixty issues requiring changes, the most important article deals with Kirkuk. Currently, Iraqis who have no familial ties to Kirkuk are being transplanted to the city with the goal of changing its ethnic composition. These efforts are aimed at swaying a scheduled 2007 referendum that will decide whether the city joins Iraq's Kurdish region or remains with the rest of the country. Turkey views these developments as extremely dangerous -- a threat to Iraq's security, territorial integrity, and long-term existence. Kirkuk is Iraq's lynchpin; if the city is attached to a specific region of the country, it will be difficult to hold Iraq together. Revising the constitution or postponing the referendum until the next parliamentary session would avert this danger. If the referendum does occur as scheduled, Turkey believes that all Iraqis, rather than just a specific constituency, should vote to decide Kirkuk's fate.

Syria. Turkey does not support a policy of total isolation toward Syria. Instead, it seeks a policy of engagement that allows it to speak with all parties, just as Turkey is the only country able to speak with both Palestinians and Israelis. Turkey played an important role in Syria's disengagement from Lebanon and will continue to use international diplomacy and persuasion toward Damascus. Turkey's efforts run parallel to those of the international community; for example, Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul suggested that the five Syrian suspects sought in connection with the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri be interviewed by the UN in Turkey.

Iran. Despite their tumultuous history, Turkey and Iran have remained at peace since 1639. Turkey's close relations with its neighbor are reflected in booming trade and tourism statistics; in 2005, 957,000 Iranians visited Turkey. Turkish policy toward Iran is defined by good neighborliness and noninterference in Tehran's internal affairs.

At the same time, Iran's nuclear ambitions are quite disturbing and pose a threat to international peace and security.

Iran's refusal to accept enriched uranium gas from Russia clearly demonstrates its desire to proceed with a domestic nuclear program. Iran has the right to obtain nuclear technology for energy needs within the boundaries of international law, which precludes nuclear weapons. As this issue unfolds, Turkey supports an amicable solution through international diplomacy and EU initiatives.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Daniel Fink, an intern with The Washington Institute's Turkish Research Program.

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