

The Future of the AKP Government and U.S.-Turkish Relations

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In-Depth Reports

On September 25, 2005, Soner Cagaptay and Semih Idiz addressed The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference. Mr. Idiz is diplomacy editor for CNN-Turk and a columnist for the Turkish newspapers Milliyet and Turkish Daily News. Dr. Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Institute's Turkish Research Program, as well as chair of the Turkey Program at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Semih Idiz

The electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in November 2002 sent shockwaves across Turkey and the Western world, because after all this was a party led by a man who had said that democracy for his party is "a train taking us to our destination."

There was also fear that an Islamist government would hate the idea of Turkey becoming a member of the EU, as the previous Islamist government under former prime minister Necmettin Erbakan had done, driving the country away from the west and toward the east. Surprisingly, the AKP embraced the idea of Europe, and as if to deny its Islamist roots, it passionately went forth with the reforms that the EU asked for.

Many analysts at that time felt that with the EU reforms, the AKP was trying to curb the power of the secular establishment and that it would use the EU process to push for change on issues important to its constituency, such as the headscarf and the imam hatip (religious vocational high schools).

The AKP is far from being homogeneous and unified. The party harbors center-right politicians and nationalist elements, as well as ultraconservative and religious members. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan has not been able to satisfy the conservative religious element, because he has not been able to deliver on the religious headscarf and imam hatip issues. On top of this, he is also delving into areas that are angering the nationalist element in the party, such as the Armenian issue, the Kurdish issue, and Cyprus.

Turkish elections are scheduled for 2007, and it is safe to say that the AKP will win another term even if it will not win 34 percent of the vote again. What will happen after the elections? There are parties in the wings who think they can make a comeback. This will not be possible unless they renew and transform themselves, the way the AKP did in

order to convince the electorate. New movements in the Turkish political arena will not come from the periphery, which thinks it can make a comeback easily, but from within the AKP, which will beget its own opposition. There are two wings in the AKP already. One wing is led by Abdullah Gul, who was the Turkish prime minister briefly before Erdogan. Gul represents a tolerant political style but with a fundamentalist religious aspect. The more radical element in the AKP that wants a more assertive Islamic tone in government, similar to the tone Erbakan set.

Turkey is, in a way, condemned to a parliamentary democracy, because the republic itself in 1923 emerged from within parliament. Ataturk got his mandate from parliament, and he had to renew this mandate every six months. There is no way that a single party can rule for a long time in Turkey, because of the diversity of opinions and beliefs in Anatolia. This is why it is not possible to have an Islamist government based on sharia rules in Turkey. If there were such an attempt, there would be strong opposition from the Alevis and other groups.

Soner Cagaptay

The initial months of Turkey's EU negotiations will constitute a milestone period in Turkey's two-century-old quest to become a fully fledged member of the Western world. However, the EU journey is a long one for Turkey.

As the accession talks begin, European opposition to Turkey's membership remains strong. Several EU countries and prominent European leaders are now opposed to granting Turkey membership. The very nature of Turkey-specific accession talks, including benchmarks to close each of the thirty-five chapters of accession talks—a measure that effectively stipulates thirty-five rounds of talks with Turkey, when previous acceding countries went through one round of talks with thirty-five chapters—is leading many Turks to conclude that the EU is raising the bar against Turkey. And tough EU demands—including sensitive ones such as recognition of Greek Cyprus—are exacerbating Turkish resentment toward the EU. Many Turks believe that the EU is acting against Turkey in this manner because of condescension. This growing perception could result in a nationalist backlash in Turkey, leading to a rupture in Turkish-EU relations.

The deterioration of Turkish-EU ties would not be so alarming if Ankara's ties with its other Western partner, the United States, were in good shape. Today, most Turks blame Washington for renewed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) violence emanating from northern Iraq. Despite stabilization in bilateral ties since the fallout of the Iraq war and the efforts of the AKP government to mend fences with Washington, various Turkish political forces are coalescing in opposition to U.S. inaction against the PKK. Today, Turkish casualties from PKK attacks are occurring at a rate similar to that faced by U.S. forces in Iraq. The violence could damage bilateral ties further if the PKK expanded its attacks into western Turkey—an area containing all of Turkey's large cities, almost all its tourism infrastructure, and a major share of its economic assets.

In order to win Turkey, Washington ought to focus on confidence-building with secular nationalist Turks, the majority constituency in the country. The quickest way for Washington to reach this group is by addressing the issue that they feel most strongly about: the PKK. Short of a full-scale U.S. campaign against the PKK in Iraq, the best short-term method of fighting the organization is by targeting its leadership in Northern Iraq as well as shutting its financial arms in Europe through cooperation with European agencies. In addition to action against the PKK, Washington has a less costly option that could sway Turkish public opinion: Cyprus. Prior to the April 2004 UN referendum, Washington and Brussels declared that they would end the isolation of Turkish Cyprus if its residents supported the Annan plan for the island's unification, which they did. Initial efforts to help Turkish Cyprus, including a May 31 visit by U.S. congressmen, have already improved Turkish public opinion toward the United States. At this stage, further helpful measures could include establishing direct flights to and from that part of the island, facilitating trade and cultural ties, and expanding U.S. political contacts with Turkish Cyprus.

The sooner such actions are taken, the better the prospects for preserving the U.S.-Turkish relationship. It would be

a great irony if the United States lost Turkey while trying to hold on to Iraq. Dangerously shorn as it is of Middle Eastern allies, Washington cannot afford further deterioration in its relations with a country that has long been one of the western world's greatest allies in the region.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Düden Yegenoglu.

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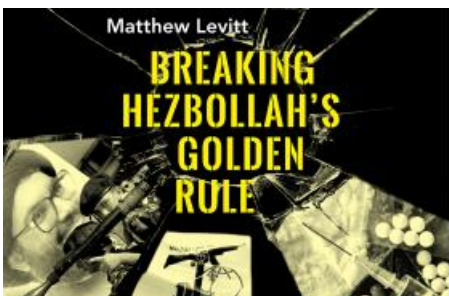
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