

The State of U.S.-Turkish Relations

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Articles & Testimony

Testimony before the House Committee on International Relations.

We have a number of issues to discuss. I would like to focus on three of them, namely:

1. Turkey's importance for the U.S; 2. U.S.-Turkish ties within the context of the ripple effects of the Iraq War; and 3. Turkey's European Union prospects in order to draw suggestions on improving the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

Why Is Turkey Still Important?

Turkey straddles two regions of chief importance to the U.S. The Middle East to the south, and Central Eurasia—an energy rich area with a large Muslim population, stretching from the Black Sea to Central Asia—to the north. Given its location and because of post-September 11 U.S. priorities towards these regions, Turkey bears utmost importance for Washington.

Legacy of the Iraq War

Yet, as has been hinted by some recent opinion polls such as a BBC survey, which was publicized on February 5—interestingly, on the exact day when Secretary Rice was in Ankara—most Turks seem to take issue with U.S. foreign policy, especially the Iraq War. Mr. Chairman, if I were to name one single unintended victim of the Iraq War, that would be the U.S.-Turkish relationship. The war seems to have angered most Turks.

Nationalists both on the right and the left, the majority constituency in the country, are upset with the United States because the war enhanced the Kurds' political leverage in Iraq, while the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq has escaped U.S. occupation untouched. Other groups, such as liberals who are prominent in the media and the academia, as well as Islamists and conservatives, including those in the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), resent the war too. The liberals see it as "illegal occupation," while the Islamists abhor the war as an "attack on fellow Muslims." In short, the Iraq War has created an atmosphere of distrust towards U.S. foreign policy among policy makers and common people alike.

While Turkey bears utmost importance for the United States in Central Eurasia and the Middle East, given the abovementioned public diplomacy challenges, how can Washington win the Turks over?

Mr. Chairman, the issue is that as a result of the Iraq War, the U.S. appears to have lost the confidence of the largest

and most powerful constituency in Turkish politics, the nationalists. In this regard, the Kurdish issue is the major factor, and it is here that the United States can make inroads if it wants to repair relations with Turkey.

Short- to Mid-Term Policies

PKK: The quickest way of achieving this goal is by addressing the issue that most excites the nationalist majority in Turkey, namely the PKK, a group on the State Department's List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. The PKK has around 5,000 terrorists in northern Iraq. If the United States showed its commitment in the fight against the PKK, a Turkish majority would quickly be swayed back in favor of America. What can be done against the PKK? This is a hierarchical organization composed of tactical brains and fighter drones. If Washington worked with Turkey to eliminate the group's leadership, the PKK would be paralyzed, as it was after Turkey captured its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in 1998 when the organization was so crippled it declared a unilateral ceasefire and pulled out of Turkey.

But such action carries a political risk for the United States, dependant as it is on the Iraqi Kurds. Action against the PKK demands a relatively stable Iraq, which appears to be still some way down the line. In the meantime, the United States, however, has another, politically risk-free option.

Cyprus: The fate of Turkish Cyprus is very important, as it appears to hold the key to Turkey's EU membership. Turkish Cypriots showed a spirit of compromise during the April 2004 vote on the UN plan to unify the island. However, although Turkish Cypriots accepted the plan, Greek Cypriots overwhelmingly rejected it. Most Turks now feel the constructive attitude of the Turkish Cypriots has gone unrewarded. Today, Washington, Ankara, Turkish Cypriots, and the EU are all on the same page regarding Cyprus, aiming for a bi-zonal federation. If the United States stepped in to push towards this goal, by offering trade opportunities, cultural contacts, tourism, and easing the economic and humanitarian sanctions Northern Cyprus has endured, it would not only clear a major hurdle ahead of Ankara's EU accession, but also improve its image in Turkey.

Long-term Policies

When the U.S.-Turkish ties faced a crisis in 2003, the deterioration in the relationship was compounded by the fact that bilateral military and political ties were not supported by strong economic relations. The two countries now need to focus on legislation to bolster economic ties, including steps such as revisiting the Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ) issue as well as increasing U.S. investment in Turkey to ensure that the next time the relationship faces a crisis, a powerful business lobby will step in for damage control, something that did not happen in 2003.

Mr. Chairman, before we get there, however, there is a looming short-term problem in Iraq that could further weaken the ties.

If the PKK stepped up its violent campaign against Turkey, launching sensational attacks on urban targets—such a strategy seems to be in the making: last week, Turkish police arrested a suicide bomber on her way to Istanbul with four pounds of plastic explosives—this would dampen the bilateral ties further. Most Turks would see the fact that the PKK has recently deployed from Northern Iraq into Turkey as proof that lack of action against this group has allowed it to hurt Turkey.

The Turkish Side

While there is a lot the United States can do to improve ties, there are also ways Ankara can step up to the plate.

But, first, Turkey may find it useful to decide if, in the future, it will cash in its strategic importance with the United States, something it has not done so well recently.

Mr. Chairman, I see a choice for Turkey: if the AKP shied away from taking the initiative in U.S.-Turkish relations, Turkey would remain a country with unused and therefore not-so-valuable strategic importance. On the other hand, if Ankara were to take ownership of U.S.-Turkish relationship and cooperate with Washington in its neighborhood,

Turkey could once again be a valuable ally.

In this regard, I would say Ankara has lately taken the right steps. Since the AKP's rise to power in November 2002, most analysts have been wondering whether government formed by a party with an Islamist pedigree would erode the two qualities that make Turkey unique, namely the country's democracy and secular regime. We have found out that Turkish democracy and secularism are both very strong. Yet, a third quality that makes Turkey unique, namely the country's ability to conduct normal relations with the Western world, seems to have been eroded over the past two years. This is where I would say the AKP has moved stones, whether it is the deterioration in U.S.-Turkish relations, rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, or the enhanced Turkish-Iranian dialogue.

Lately though, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has come forth with a much needed clear vision on U.S.-Turkish relationship. On April 27, he said: "the Turkish nation is aware of the fact that the two countries need each other today and tomorrow."

Refuting the latest claims of Turkish opposition to the United States, he said, "Turkish people appreciate U.S. support for the EU, and against terrorism. Continued friendly efforts from the United States will add to the development of U.S.-Turkish relations."

Erdogan also stressed that "Turkey-U.S. cooperation should continue with regard to Iraq, solution of Arab-Israeli conflict, Caucasus, stability in Central Asia, reform efforts in the Middle East, reconstruction of Afghanistan, fight with terrorism, and energy security."

If we were to see more willingness from the AKP to take the initiative in bilateral ties, that would be very positive. What is promising in this regard is that Turkey's secular elite has already taken the initiative in emphasizing the need for improving the relationship with the United States.

EU Membership

Mr. Chairman, allow me now to briefly discuss the impact of Ankara's EU prospects on U.S.-Turkish relations.

We may hear many different opinions on Turkey's EU accession. And they may all make sense. The bottom-line is that this is a positive process that will anchor Turkey into a Western club.

If Ankara's EU accession were derailed with the EU snubbing Turkey, we could see a massive backlash against the EU; the Turks, being fiery nationalists, would be offended by the way the EU was treating them. If Turkish-EU relations suffered a setback today, when U.S.-Turkish relations are not at their best, this would mean that for the first time, Turkey would have weak relations with both Europe and America. This grave scenario in which Turkey is alienated from the Western world ought to be prevented. Whatever our views on transatlantic relations, better Ankara close to Washington or Paris than to Tehran.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, as I finish, allow me to elaborate on the future of U.S.-Turkish relations. As a regional power, Turkey needs the United States to safeguard its global interests, such as in the Eurasian energy corridor or towards EU accession.

For instance, once Turkey begins accession negotiations with the EU in October, Brussels will be making tough demands from Ankara. At that time, good relations with Washington will be a valuable asset for Turkey; to the extent that Ankara demonstrates the strength of its alternative partnerships, it will be able to ask the EU to be flexible in its expectations vis-a-vis Turkey.

Washington needs Ankara as well. Although America can clearly act in the Middle East without Turkey, recent events, such as the request to expand U.S. use of the Incirlik airbase, show that such moves are easier when Ankara

is on board.

The United States needs Turkey outside the Middle East too, such as in Central Eurasia. Turkey's ties with the countries of this region make Ankara a desirable partner for Washington in facing the challenges of this region.

There are many other issues on which Washington and Ankara could continue cooperation, ranging from the Turkish-Israeli partnership to the war on terror.

The question is when to act to bridge the gap between Washington and Ankara. The right time is now. For the past few years, Turkey focused all its energy on the EU, hoping to get a date for accession talks. Now that Ankara has a date and the Europeans are introducing extra requirements for Turkey to satisfy before moving ahead, the tone of Turkish-EU relationship is no more one of euphoria, but rather one of business as usual, with ups and downs. I had suggested back in October that this would happen and when it did, the United States would have an opportunity window to get Turkey's attention whether in Cyprus or in Iraq.

Even then, some would suggest that U.S. priorities in Iraq leave little room for taking Turkey's sensitivities there into consideration. I would say that since the U.S.-Turkish relationship crashed in Iraq initially; it can be rebuilt in Iraq. Others may ask, why the rush? To this, I would answer, quoting a friend of mine, a senior State Department official: "Would it not be ironic if we won Iraq but lost Turkey?"

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