

The Present and Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations: Ankara's Perspective

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Brief Analysis

On April 14, 2005, Ambassador Ali Tuiyan, Turkish undersecretary of foreign affairs, addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Ambassador Tuiyan served as deputy undersecretary for bilateral political affairs at the Turkish foreign ministry between 2001 and 2004. Prior to that, he served as Turkish ambassador to Greece, Saudi Arabia, and Canada, and, from 1995 to 1997, as deputy undersecretary for political affairs in Ankara. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. [Read his full prepared remarks.](#)
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Recently, some U.S. think tanks and media outlets have accused Turkey of taking a soft or silent stance on issues pertaining to Syria and Iran. In reality, Turkey is just as attentive to these issues as any other country. At the same time, Ankara must be realistic. Whatever happens in the Middle East has direct repercussions on Turkey, whether politically or economically. Syria and Iran are both Turkey's neighbors, and it would be inconceivable for Ankara to remain indifferent to them. Turkey is located in a tough neighborhood and must make the most of situations it is faced with. In this regard, Ankara is interested in improving its relations with all of its neighbors, including Iran and Syria.

Turkey has enough historical experience to prevent it from acting naively. Certainly, appeasement is dangerous in the Middle East, and power still produces respect. This is only part of the region's multifaceted reality, however. The forces of globalization, the spread of communications technology, and the growth of the media accentuate the increasing importance of the human factor and political identity in these societies. Therefore, greater responsiveness and sensitivity are needed in the formulation of policies toward the region.

Turkey must meet with its Middle Eastern neighbors in order to promote confidence in their ability to govern transparently. A promising reform dynamic has emerged in the region, with the potential to generate prosperity and democratization. Turkey has vocally supported such change by serving as an example.

Iran

The international community must develop a more concrete agenda toward Iran. If Tehran were to build a nuclear weapon, it would greatly alter the regional security balance. There is no viable military solution to this problem. Turkey supports the diplomatic efforts of the EU-3 (European Union members Germany, France, and Britain) and is interested in finding a solution based on International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) parameters. Ankara hopes to convince Tehran that its interests are better served through cooperation rather than confrontation. Iran's willingness to cooperate with the IAEA is particularly important. Ankara supports Iran's right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, though in full cooperation with, and subject to verification by, the IAEA. Ankara also believes that Iran should stop uranium enrichment. It must be remembered, however, that Turkey's principal advantage as an intermediary on this issue—namely, its greater understanding of the region compared to outside actors—is not some sort of magic wand capable of dispelling the problem.

Syria

Turkey hopes that Syria will abide by UN Security Council Resolution 1559 and withdraw its troops and intelligence units from Lebanon. In the past, Ankara has had a rough relationship with Damascus due to Syrian support for the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). There have been functioning communication channels in place for some time, however. Turkish president Ahmet Necdet Sezer's recent trip to Syria was planned a long time ago in order to make use of these channels; it was not meant to send any sort of message to the international community. Ankara is trying to build a culture of compromise while at the same time advocating reform throughout the region. Although Turkey would like its neighbors to become more transparent and democratic, it understands that what happens in Syria is for Syria to decide.

Iraq

Iraq presents a good opportunity for U.S.-Turkish cooperation. Ankara's basic policy is that no Iraqi constituency should be excluded from the current political process. In this regard, the alienation of Turkmens and Sunni Arabs is undesirable. Turkey's stance is not based on narrow interests; rather, it rests on the belief that the ultimate security of the Iraqi political and social fabric lies in the ability of all groups to reconcile their priorities and interests. The presence of the terrorist PKK in Iraq is a major issue on Turkey's agenda, and it must be addressed. Ankara realizes that Washington is well aware of the sensitivity of this issue. The current situation in Iraq has not yet allowed for a solution to this problem. Yet, there is more than one way to deal with the PKK.

Turkey can also help Iraq rebuild its institutions and economy. One of Ankara's priorities is to increase trade by opening a second border gate between the two countries. This would ease the burden on the existing Habur Gate, which suffers from severe bottlenecks.

Israel

The Turkish-Israeli relationship remains strong. As with Arab and Muslim countries, Turkey's friendship with the Jewish world is entrenched at the grassroots level. Anti-Semitism is virtually unknown to Turks, and the government has adopted a zero-tolerance policy toward it. Turkish-Israeli relations began in 1948, while Turkish-Jewish friendship dates back nearly 500 years. This friendship has not only served as the basis for good ties between Turkey and Israel, but has also garnered support for Turkey among American Jewish organizations, which Ankara certainly appreciates.

Turkey supports the peace process and has a vested interest in both Israeli security and Palestinian statehood. Recently, Turkey donated 25,000 police uniforms to the Palestinian Authority, and it plans to convene trilateral meetings between Turkish, Israeli, and Palestinian businesspeople in Istanbul. In addition, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will visit Israel in early May.

War on Terror

Terrorism is not a new issue for Turks; they have had to deal with the PKK for quite some time. Ankara has not forgotten Washington's past support against PKK terrorists. Moreover, Turkey, like the United States, has been a target of al-Qaeda. Given these and other factors, Turkey is a strong U.S. ally in the war on terror.

U.S.-Turkish Relations

The U.S.-Turkish partnership has long served the interests of both countries. The United States is a superpower pursuing interests on a global scale, while Turkey is located at a strategic crossroads. Hence, the two countries share common objectives and values.

Although Turkey continues to pursue EU membership, accession will not come at the price of weakening U.S.-Turkish relations. Yet, Turkey and the United States must nourish the relationship by deepening their cooperation

and setting a common agenda. For example, they could encourage interaction between the U.S. Congress and Turkish parliament. Regionally speaking, Turkey has much to offer Washington.

At the popular level, polls show that 74 percent of Turks view the United States as a major ally. During the Cold War, the two countries relied on each other on security matters. Once the Cold War ended, globalization entered the equation, and the use of soft power came to the forefront. In light of this shared history, short-term differences should not change the nature of the partnership.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Nuray Nazli Inal. ❖

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