

Changing Turkish Public Attitudes toward the United States: Premises and Prospects

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Brief Analysis

American and Turkish media have been awash recently with news of increased Turkish resentment toward the United States. Media coverage has focused on negative portrayals of U.S. foreign policy in Turkey, including recent opinion polls such as a January 19 BBC survey, according to which 82 percent of Turks oppose the Bush administration. It may indeed be the case that Turks have become more critical of U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, such sentiments, previously limited to a fringe Islamist constituency, now seem pervasive across the political landscape, uniting Islamists, nationalists, and even secular liberals (see Soner Cagaptay, "[Where Goes the U.S.-Turkish Relationship.](#)" ([templateC06.php?CID=760](#)) Middle East Quarterly, fall 2004). How concerned should Washington be? What can the Bush administration and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey do to address this issue?

How Turks Relate to the United States

When considering their relationship with the United States (and the wider Western world), most Turks share a desire to be treated as equals. Anti-Western sentiment flares up when they perceive that Western nations are not giving them their due respect. For example, at its December 1997 Luxembourg Summit, the European Union (EU) harshly rebuked Ankara, arguing in effect that Turkey was not "good enough" for the EU. This prompted a sudden rise of anti-EU sentiment in Turkey. The fact that various EU countries offered refuge to Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), during this period only served to exacerbate such feelings. Finding the EU's behavior condescending, many Turks turned vehemently against the union, boycotting its goods and even questioning Turkey's basic ties with European countries. Yet, once the EU corrected itself at its December 1999 Helsinki Summit, promising that it would treat Turkey's membership application fairly, anti-EU sentiment subsided almost as quickly as it had arisen (with Ocalan's imprisonment in February 1999 no doubt contributing to this change).

Washington faces a similar problem today, with many Turks believing that the United States is not treating them with respect. In a sense, the Turkish parliament's March 1, 2003, decision to bar U.S. troops from transiting Turkey for the Iraq invasion is analogous to the 1997 Luxembourg decision and its effect on EU-Turkish relations. Most

Turks feel slighted by the fact that Washington launched the Iraq war despite the vote in parliament against such a campaign. Their resentment increased when U.S. troops arrested Turkish soldiers in northern Iraq on July 4, 2003, charging them with anti-Kurdish activities. The lack of U.S. action against the PKK presence in northern Iraq has only exacerbated such feelings. In fact, issues related to Kurdish nationalism seem to be damaging the U.S.-Turkish relationship in the same way that European sympathy for Ocalan hurt EU-Turkish relations in the 1990s, with U.S.-Turkish relations today similar to EU-Turkish relations between 1997 and 1999. If Washington does not take a step equivalent to the EU's 1999 Helsinki decision, U.S.-Turkish ties may remain strained.

What Can Washington Do?

Iraq. If Iraq is the issue on which the U.S.-Turkish relationship crashed, opening a new chapter on this same issue can help mend the relationship. The two most important problems in this regard are the PKK and Kirkuk.

Regarding the PKK, the United States should consider various measures: taking decisive action against the organization, convincing the EU to shut down continent-wide PKK networks, cracking down on global PKK financial activity, and helping Turkey capture PKK captains in northern Iraq (as a hierarchical organization, the PKK is paralyzed every time it loses a leader). Washington would also do well to remind Ankara of the longstanding U.S. commitment to fighting the PKK. (Most Turks seem to have forgotten that U.S. support was vital to Turkey's military victory over the PKK in the 1990s, as well as to Ocalan's capture in 1999).

Regarding Kirkuk, the Turkish public would be upset if this multiethnic city of Turkmens (ethnic Turks), Christians, Kurds, and Arabs, which rests on nearly 40 percent of Iraq's oil deposits, were annexed into Iraq's Kurdish provinces. In fact, the situation could spin out of control as events unfold, especially if the Turkmen population is put in harm's way. The Turkish people possess an inflammable sensitivity for ethnic Turks in the country's vicinity. For instance, when Turkish Cypriots were subjected to ethnic cleansing in the 1960s and 1970s, and when Bulgarian Turks came under a forced assimilation campaign in the 1980s, the Turkish public rallied to their cause almost overnight, forcing Ankara to take action. Even individual atrocities seem sufficient to rally the Turks to action. For example, on December 24, 1963, a Turkish Cypriot family, including two children, were found slaughtered in their home. The next day, photographs of the atrocity surfaced in the Turkish press; that same day, Turkish warplanes engaged in warning flights over Greek Cypriot military lines. Hence, it is not farfetched to predict that, should Turkmens get hurt in Iraq, the Turkish public would take up their cause in an emotional and direct way.

Cyprus. The unresolved Cyprus issue presents the United States with another chance to mend relations with Turkey. Although Turkish Cypriots voted in favor of an April 2004 UN plan to unify the island, Greek Cypriots voted it down. Since then, the EU has granted accession to (Greek) Cyprus. In due course, Greek Cypriots have prevented the EU from fulfilling its promise to ease Turkish Cypriots' economic isolation. With some creative thinking on this issue, Washington could not only ease the humanitarian difficulties faced by the Turkish Cypriots, but also help close a bitter chapter in U.S.-Turkish relations. The February 17 trip by a U.S. trade delegation to Turkish Cyprus, the first official visit of any kind by the United States, was a good step in this direction.

What Can Ankara Do?

For its part, the AKP government should take an active interest in combating anti-Americanism in its ranks. Criticism of U.S. foreign policy in the Turkish media aside, Ankara should take issue with internal mischaracterizations of U.S. actions in Iraq, in the same way that the U.S. government does not permit official mischaracterizations of Turkey.

Why Act Now?

The conundrum facing U.S.-Turkish relations is perhaps not that unusual. According to the previously mentioned BBC poll, most European nations oppose the Bush administration as well. Yet, anti-American attitudes in Turkey

have been characterized by unusually harsh rhetoric and pervasiveness; if left unchecked, such sentiment could become embedded, even to the point of rupturing U.S.-Turkish relations. Washington and Ankara need to take the appropriate steps to prevent this unwelcome development. A concerted, mutual, interest-based assessment of the relationship may provide the key for renewed U.S.-Turkish ties in 2005.

As a regional power, Turkey needs the United States to safeguard its global interests. For example, when Ankara begins EU membership negotiations in October, Brussels will make many tough demands. Healthy relations with Washington will be a valuable Turkish asset in these talks: to the extent that Ankara demonstrates the strength of its alternative partnerships, the EU will feel the need to be flexible in its demands. The United States needs Turkey, too. Although America can take action in the Middle East without Turkey, recent events -- such as Washington's request to expand U.S. use of the Incirlik airbase in southern Turkey -- show that those actions are easier when Ankara is on board.

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