

Where Goes the U.S.-Turkish Relationship?

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Articles & Testimony

Throughout the 1990s, Turkish foreign policy analysts had an easy job. After all, Turkish foreign policy was predictable. Ankara cooperated enthusiastically with Washington, whether in the Middle East or in the Balkans. Turkey aligned itself with Israel and kept at arms length from Middle Eastern neighbors such as Syria and Iran. In Europe, Ankara traded heavily with the European Union (EU) but did not allow the EU to dictate foreign policy. The European Union's frequent allegations and criticism of human rights abuses in Turkey, especially with regard to Turkey's fight against Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan) terrorists, soured the relationship, which deteriorated even further when the EU declared Turkey unfit for membership at its December 1997 Luxembourg Summit. [1]

But today the situation is far different. On May 20, 2004, for example, Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused both Israel and the United States of "state terror." [2] The frequency and harshness of criticism of the Jewish state has increased greatly. [3] The shift within Turkey has been dramatic. Ankara's foreign policy is moving into alignment with that of the EU. Today, the Turkish foreign ministry endorses 95 percent of the EU's foreign policy decisions. [4] Not only did Turkey stay out of the war in Iraq, but it has maintained at best lukewarm support for U.S. initiatives on the Middle East ranging from the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) to holding the Iranian government accountable for its clandestine nuclear program.

These changes result from three seismic events in Turkey. First is the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP is rooted in Turkey's Islamist opposition Welfare Party, which the Turkish supreme court shut down in 1997 for undermining the country's secular order. The AKP, which now calls itself a conservative democratic movement, came to power in a November 2002 landslide. Its electoral success had less to do with Islamist ideology, however, than with widespread public dissatisfaction with the economic and political instability and widespread corruption that characterized the 1990s. [5] The AKP received a solid mandate, taking two-thirds of the seats in the legislature, enough to pass constitutional amendments and dictate policies without respect to the secular opposition.

The second major change is a solid perception among the foreign policy elite in Ankara that after reforms to satisfy the EU's accession criteria, [6] Turkey now stands a chance of EU admission. Turkey's special relationship with the United States may have brought rewards, but none match the promise that Turks assume EU membership would bring.

The third shift in the Turkish-U.S. relationship has been the ripple effect of the 2003 Iraq war, which remains very unpopular in Turkey. According to a recent poll, when Turks were forced to opt between the EU and the United States, 51 percent chose the EU; only six percent favored the United States. Perhaps reflecting the anger over the Iraq war, the same poll showed that a third of all Turks identified the United States as the greatest threat to world peace. [7] Understanding the new dynamics is key to identifying the new parameters of Turkish foreign policy and to determining where Turkey— and its important relationship with the United States—might go.

When the EU Takes Turkey Seriously ...

Until 1999, Turkish-EU relations were at best lethargic. Neither Ankara nor the “Eurocrats” in Brussels held out any hope that Turkey, which first applied for membership in 1987, would ever join the union. Brussels considered Turkey’s policies toward the PKK to be a disqualifying factor. [8] The elevated position of the military within Turkish politics also made Turkey unsuitable. [9] The European Union’s leadership did not hide its hostility toward Turkey. Their constant criticism convinced both Turkish decision- makers and the man-on-the-street that EU membership was a pipe dream. Ankara had little choice but to look to Washington for partnership. [10]

All this began to change, however, in 1999. First, Turkey caught PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. His capture decapitated and demoralized the PKK and its leader-driven rank and file. [11] The subsequent decline in violence allowed the Turkish military to relax. Long hostage to the PKK’s destructive nihilism, Turkish politicians could, for the first time since Turgut Özal’s presidency (1989-93) discuss critical reforms, such as cultural rights for the Kurds.

As the Turkish government softened its domestic policies, the EU began to think differently about Turkey. After fierce U.S. lobbying, the EU announced at its December 1999 Helsinki summit its decision to accept Turkey as a candidate for membership: Turkey could join the union if, like the other applicant countries, it satisfied the EU’s membership rules, [12] and met the terms of the Copenhagen criteria, which mandate rule of law, structures to guarantee democracy, and minority rights. [13] The Helsinki decision opened political floodgates in Turkey. Now that the EU took Turkey seriously, the Turkish leadership would treat the EU likewise. The impossible became possible. Ankara abolished capital punishment, enabled Kurdish language education and broadcasting and, last but not least, limited the executive powers and responsibilities of the country’s powerful National Security Council, subjecting it to civilian authority. [14]

The prospect of EU membership also spurred reassessment of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey’s secular foreign policy elite is European at heart. Almost all Turkish diplomats are educated either in Europe, or at European schools in Turkey. They share Atatürk’s European Weltanschauung and feel relieved to move beyond Turkey’s traditional tensions with Europe and to reinforce a pro-European stance. The new pro-EU orientation of Turkish foreign policy became more pronounced after the December 2002 Copenhagen summit, when Brussels— again after U.S. lobbying —agreed to open accession negotiations with Turkey as soon as Ankara satisfied the Copenhagen criteria. [15]

The Iraq War of 2003

If Turkey’s reorientation of its foreign policy toward Europe came at the expense of the United States, then the Iraq war exacerbated the process, reviving dormant political forces and anti- Americanism. Months before the start of the 2003 Iraq war, Turkish statements mirrored Franco-German rhetoric in its insistence that the war “lacked international legitimacy.” [16] The Bush administration had quite a shock when on March 1, 2003, the AKP- controlled Turkish parliament voted down a proposal to allow the coalition to open a second front from Turkey. The pro-AKP press was vociferous in its anti-American tone, especially after the start of the war. Columnist Ahmet Tasgetiren, for example, wrote in *Yeni Safak* that, the “administration that President Bush shares with the neo-cons has created a logic of use of force which brings shame to its nation just as Hitler’s.” [17] The Iraq war also added fuel to the Islamist fire in Turkey. Both the pro- AKP *Yeni Safak* and the once-marginal *Vakit*— which opposes the AKP

only in its pro-EU agenda—have moved into the mainstream with conspiracy theories to explain how the Iraq campaign is a U.S.-Jewish-Israeli attempt to dominate the Middle East. [18]

The antiwar anti-Americanism was not isolated to the Islamist camp, however. The 2003 war awakened leftist anti-Americanism among intellectuals and the academic and media elite, many of whom had flirted with extreme leftist, anti-American movements in the 1970s. The Iraq war re-ignited the tendency among Turkish leftists to find U.S.-led conspiracies everywhere. Over the past few years, Turkish newspapers have been awash with theories attributing all problems in the Middle East to the United States. One egregious but widely circulated theory claimed that U.S. bombing in Iraq triggered the May 1, 2003 earthquake in the Turkish city of Bingöl. [19] Otherwise credible journalists have speculated in the postwar period that the United States sought to keep Turkey out of Iraq to keep Turkey from exploiting oil deposits there. [20] Turkey's Kurds have also been prone to anti-U.S. conspiracies. On November 22, 2003, for example, Hasan Bildirici, a leftist Kurdish journalist, wrote in the *Özgür Politika* daily that Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were both working for the United States. [21] While such claims often circulate among extreme nationalists of all sorts in Turkey, many intellectuals, not only in the AKP but also in the secular mainstream, see the Iraq campaign (and the Greater Middle East Initiative) as part of a “neocolonial” U.S. effort to establish hegemony in the region. [22]

The war also returned the Kurdish issue to the forefront. Anxiety about Kurdish nationalism had dissipated in Turkey after Öcalan's capture. But the empowerment of Iraqi Kurds—and their quest for autonomy—in the wake of the 2003 war reopened old wounds in Turkey. Many Turkish officials fear that Kurdish separatists in Turkey will abuse Iraqi federalism to their advantage. The fact that the PKK controls 5,000 terrorists in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq exacerbates their fears, all the more so since the PKK ended their cease-fire on June 1, 2004. The wariness towards Kurdish nationalism is even bridging the traditional gap between Turkish nationalists on the right and the left. *Ortodogu*, a newspaper close to Nationalist Action Party, and *Cumhuriyet*, which represents the opinion of core secular leftist, nationalist Turks, now voice similar opinions on the subject. [23]

The infamous “July 4 incident” brought the issue to a crisis stage. On July 4, 2003, U.S. forces arrested Turkish special operation troops in Sulaymaniyah, a major city in northern Iraq, on charges that they were conspiring to assassinate elected officials there. [24] Many Turks saw this episode—in which the Turkish troops were disarmed, hooded, and detained—as a deliberate provocation and a clear sign that Washington favored Iraqi Kurds over a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally. [25] More than a year later, the Turkish military remains furious about this episode.

While Turks across the political spectrum blame the United States for the war and for empowering Iraqi Kurds, it was, ironically, the AKP government that strengthened the U.S.-Kurdish alliance. By refusing to open a northern front, the AKP majority in parliament effectively forced the United States to become dependent on Iraqi Kurdish militias. The Kurds now demand a reward for their participation, and Washington appears willing to oblige. Turkey is ill at ease with the emergence of a Kurdish proto-state in Iraq, which will likely only strengthen should the rest of Iraq deteriorate into chaos. As Turkey is faced with an autonomous Kurdish state on its borders, many among Turkey's security-military elite question whether it was the U.S. strategy since the start to establish such a state.

The End of the Turkish-Israeli Partnership?

But, the greatest divergence between Ankara and Washington revolves perhaps around Israel. Turkey and the European Union have adopted a common front arguing that reform and progress in the Middle East cannot happen until a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is found. [26] Given the Turkish government's influence on the media, it is not surprising that 72 percent of Turks now have a negative view of *Cagaptay*: U.S. and Turkey the Greater Middle East Initiative and that more than two-thirds believe Turkey should side with the Palestinians (less than 3 percent thought that Turkey should favor Israel). [27] Both Turkey and the EU criticize Israel's targeted killing

of Hamas leaders. [28] Erdogan referred to the killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin as a “terrorist act,” [29] and the daily *Yeni Safak* labeled Yassin’s assassination “Israeli terrorism.” [30]

Yeni Safak provides a window into AKP thinking. The newspaper’s owner Sadik Albayrak and Erdogan are in-laws. The prime minister again accused Israel of “state terrorism” after an Israeli operation to root out weapons smuggling tunnels led to the demolition of several houses in Ramah. [31] Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül added that the attacks could adversely affect Turkish-Israeli relations. [32] The Islamist daily *Vakit* went further and proclaimed that the “terrorist-Zionist state of Israel, a protégé of the United States and Britain,” was conducting “genocide” in the Palestinian territories. [33] While the AKP cannot be held accountable for every statement in the Islamist press, the fact is that five years ago, such sentiments would not be found in the mass-circulation press.

With regard to Israel’s security barrier, the Turkish government has been even more critical than the EU. When the U.N. General Assembly voted on a resolution condemning the fence on August 12, 2003, EU member countries abstained while Turkey joined a large number of Muslim countries in criticizing Israel. [34] AKP has also at times channeled aversion toward Israel into new calls for Islamist solidarity. Not by coincidence, the AKP increased its anti-Israel rhetoric just days ahead of the June 14 summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). The Turkish candidate, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, later won election as the new OIC chair.

The European Paradox

Anti-Americanism, enhanced by the 2003 Iraq war, has created strange bedfellows in Turkey. Secular nationalists and the AKP find themselves in the same camp. Meanwhile, the pro-EU drive is the strongest political force in the country, with the AKP and secular liberals rallying behind it. To a large extent, Turkey’s influential business community has been happy to support the shift. Over half of Turkey’s trade is with the EU; [35] large and small businesses alike see tangible gains in union membership. [36]

Whether the AKP continues its drive to synchronize Turkish foreign policy with the EU will hinge upon the outcome of the next EU conference in December 2004. The best outcome, but most unlikely, is an enthusiastic European welcome of Turkey into its fold, with few issues for negotiation and a promised accession date. Obviously, this would benefit the AKP tremendously and reaffirm Erdogan’s policies although many secularists and opponents of the AKP point out that EU accession under the AKP might further entrench the AKP. Since polls indicate that more than three-quarters of Turks support EU accession, [37] getting a date might push the AKP’s popularity over the psychologically important 50 percent threshold. [38] This would likely result in an AKP successor to Turkish president Ahmed Necdet Sezer, whose term expires in 2007. Because the Turkish president appoints judges to the country’s staunchly secular high courts, this could further erode secular checks to the AKP’s power.

Conversely, if the EU rejects any chance of Turkish accession or attaches humiliating or impossible strings, then the pro-EU alliance between secular liberals and Islamists might collapse. This scenario could result in three possible outcomes. Some Turks might seek to revitalize ties to the United States, but this is unlikely in the short-term; the damage wrought by the Iraq war and the Turkish media’s anti-Americanism is simply too great to overcome quickly. There might be an anti-Western backlash among Islamists who desire greater alliance with Iran and the Arab Middle East. Simultaneously, an EU rejection might spur a nationalist backlash in which Turkey turns inward, refusing to deal intimately with either the EU or Washington. After all, many people, including some in the Turkish armed forces, point to meetings between AKP leaders and U.S. diplomats before the AKP’s sudden rise and consequent election victory in November 2002 as evidence of conspiracy. Recent statements by Secretary of State Colin Powell praising Turkey as a “Muslim democracy” only reinforce such sentiments. [39]

Given the EU’s positive commentary on Turkey’s many reforms, the most likely EU offer in December is a conditional acceptance with eventual accession talks to ensure full Turkish compliance with reforms. The European

Union does not want to dissuade Turkey, but European concerns will not wither away. While Ankara looks toward Europe for affirmation, European leaders look at Turkish membership in terms of assets and liabilities. Turkish accession would bring 70 million people into the union; Turkey would become the second most populous state in the EU after Germany. The fact that Turkey is overwhelmingly Muslim does not help, given how much difficulty countries like France have in integrating their much smaller Muslim communities. Brussels also sees Turkey's relative poverty as a financial drain. Turkish income levels are below the EU average although they are on par with current EU members or countries in accession talks such as Bulgaria and Romania. [40] The "yes, but only if ..." answer—demanding full implementation of the Copenhagen criteria, something the EU has not asked from other countries—could cause many Turks to accuse the EU of hypocrisy. After all, the EU admitted several eastern European states despite serious human rights issues. Even after EU membership, some of these states are not yet in full compliance with the Copenhagen criteria. Latvia, for example, which entered the EU on May 1, 2004, continues to disenfranchise its large Russian minority. [41]

Can Turkey's Anti-Americanism Be Reversed?

The anticlimactic aftermath of the December 2004 EU decision on Turkey provides U.S. policymakers with room to maneuver. Washington faces a conundrum with regard to Turkey's EU membership. Even though the EU accession process has moved Ankara away from Washington in recent years, it is in U.S. interests to work for an unconditional "yes." This is due to two reasons. Optimism in Turkey will deflate any nationalist or Islamist backlash; it is better that Turkey moves closer to France than to Iran. In addition, any conditions will allow Paris and Berlin to effectively blackmail Turkey, enforcing strict discipline. If Turkey receives an unconditional "yes," the union's Damoclean sword might be removed from above Turkey's head. Paradoxically, by lobbying for Turkey's EU accession, Washington might help reinforce Turkey's pro- U.S. position. At this stage, however, given the transatlantic divide, direct U.S. lobbying on behalf of Turkey would have limited effectiveness. Hence, Washington might be better served to use indirect means, lobbying through friendly countries in the union, in support of Turkey's membership.

Should U.S. policymakers want to rebuild their special relationship with Turkey, it is incumbent that Washington be transparent about its policy toward the Kurds. Distrust with regard to U.S. Kurdish policy has peaked across the Turkish spectrum with the resumption of near daily PKK terrorist attacks in eastern Turkey. Given the U.S. commitment to eradicate the terror infrastructure in Iraq, many Turkish officials question why the United States ignores the PKK presence in Iraq. Filibustering by U.S. joint chiefs of staff on plans to counter the PKK have led skeptical Turks to question whether Washington is a true ally. [42]

Turkish officials suggest that even symbolic U.S. action against the PKK would be received well. During Erdogan's visit to Tehran on July 29, 2004, Iran declared that it was putting the PKK on its list of terrorist organizations. The Iranian government enjoyed the diplomatic rewards, despite the fact that the Islamic Republic does not actually have such a list. [43] While the State Department has listed the PKK as a terrorist organization since it started designating such groups, it seems at present that Tehran understands Turkish sensitivities better than Washington.

The best method to fight the PKK at this stage would be to eliminate the organization's hard-line leadership, for example, Öcalan lieutenants Cemil Bayik and Nizamettin Tas. The PKK has a leader-driven, Stalinist structure. With Öcalan in jail, the capture of its remaining leadership would be a decisive step in destroying the organization's nerve center, reducing its operational capabilities and lowering morale among its cadres.

One avenue open to U.S. policymakers would be to pressure the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties, Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to join forces with the United States and Turkey in the fight against the PKK. With such a step, these parties would signal that, past rhetoric aside, Iraqi Kurds were more interested in Turkey's welfare rather than its demise.

Any joint operations would also dull Ankara's perception of the strategic threat posed by autonomous Iraqi Kurds. Despite European propaganda to the contrary, Turkey does not discriminate against Kurds as such. Shi'ite Iran discriminates against the predominantly Sunni Kurds on the basis of religion. Syria and Iraq have histories of ethnic discrimination against the Kurds. But, Turkey embraces Kurds so long as they take pride in their Turkish citizenship. [44] At least two of Turkey's ten presidents and more than a few generals and politicians who fought against the PKK were themselves of Kurdish origin.

U.S. embassies in Ankara and Baghdad might also reinforce the Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish partnership. Turkish investment in northern Iraq, significant before the war, has skyrocketed. Turkish strategic investment in northern Iraq ranges from oil exploration to construction contracts for the Sulaymaniyah and Erbil airports. [45] The more Turkish companies are invested in northern Iraq, the less incentive either Turkish or Iraqi Kurdish politicians have to disrupt a win-win situation. Turkey also provides a natural export outlet for Kurdish products or, in the future, oil. (The major pipeline running from northern Iraq into the Mediterranean Sea passes through Turkey). U.S. companies might pay heed to this strategic vision when awarding contracts or giving contractor guidance. A Turkish economic investment in northern Iraq would bolster U.S. security. If Turkish-Kurdish interests become increasingly interwoven, northern Iraq might become a buffer against Syrian, Iranian, or even Saudi influence. The fact that the Kurds tend to be pro- Western and secular eases implementation of such a strategy.

Even if Washington supports Turkey's EU accession and eases tensions over the Kurdish issue, there will be little improvement unless the U.S. government improves its public diplomacy. One of Washington's gravest mistakes over the past couple of years has been showcasing the rise of the AKP as proof that Turkey is a democracy. AKP's coming to power is neither a sign that democracy and Islam are compatible nor the ultimate proof that Turkey is a democracy. Turkey had already proven itself as a democracy, albeit an illiberal one at times, since switching over to a multiparty system in 1946. As a predominantly Muslim country, Turkey does not need to have an Islamist (or formerly Islamist) party take power in order to prove that it is a democracy. Highlighting the rise of the AKP as proof that Turkey is a democracy has resulted in two problems. On the tactical level, this move has alienated Turkey's secular, nationalist elites from the United States who see in Washington's strategy a motive to undermine Turkey's secular order. On the other hand, such a move sends messages to the Muslim world that democracy is possible there only when and if Islamist or formerly Islamist parties come to power. In order to avoid further such tactical errors, the U.S. government should promote Turkey only as an example of a secular, democratic country.

This should not be hard to accomplish. The Turkish public traditionally receives visits by U.S. presidents and other elected officials well. For instance, a 1999 visit by President Clinton in which he addressed the Turkish parliament and praised Turkey's secular, democratic tradition, successfully heightened pro-U.S. sympathies in Turkey. [46] Engraved in the Turkish mind is a famous photograph of Clinton with a baby who had survived the 1999 earthquake. A politician's human touch generally helps persuade ordinary Turks that U.S. motives are in Turkey's interests. Over the past two years, when historic events were unfolding in Iraq, not a single highlevel U.S. statesman visited the country to explain the U.S. position to the Turks. In this regard, President Bush's June 2004 trip to Istanbul to attend the NATO summit has had only limited success. The trip did not give common Turks a chance to share the president's public presence as his itinerary was limited to high-level government officials, and the only public speech Bush delivered was addressed to a select group of Turks at a private university. Future U.S. visits to Turkey, with well-crafted photo opportunities and appropriate policy statements reaffirming U.S. support for Turkish accession to the EU and the eradication of the PKK, would effectively advance U.S. policy and stem anti-Americanism.

At the same time, the onus of better relations rests not only on Washington. The State Department must make clear to the Turkish government that the AKP must do its part to reverse the Turkish media's rampant anti-Americanism.

The AKP's reach extends beyond the conservative Islamist press. Many Turkish newspaper editors and journalists respond to signals from their government and alter tone accordingly. Much more so than in the loosely regulated American market, significant players in the Turkish media have business interests that depend on good relations with the ruling party.

An obituary for the demise of a half-century partnership is premature. The means are available to ensure that Turkey remains a staunch ally to the United States. The U.S.-Turkish relationship may change, but change is not necessarily bad. It can also mean evolution. At the beginning of the 2003 Iraq war, many people predicted that Washington did not need Turkey anymore to implement its Middle East policy. [47] Events now indicate the contrary. In the post-Saddam world, Ankara's support is crucial, not only because it provides the United States with easy access to Iraq and elsewhere in the crisis-ridden Middle East but also because a secular, democratic Turkey remains a source of inspiration for the region. In their age-old quest to join the West, the Turks today face two wests, not one. Rather than choosing between Europe and the United States, Ankara can successfully partner with both and still remain Western. That is what Atatürk would have wanted.

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