Ankara Dispatch:

Eastern Heading

by Soner Cagaptay **(/experts/soner-cagaptay)**

Sep 8, 2004

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Articles & Testimony

These days, pretty much everything in Turkey seems to focus on the European Union. Leaving a friend's apartment in Istanbul on a sultry evening in August, I came across a street quarrel. Istanbulis park literally anywhere, including the sidewalks. A middle-aged man whose driveway had been blocked by an illegally parked car was in an animated fight with the driver, yelling at him as loudly as he could, "You think Turkey will enter the EU if you park your car like this?"

In Ankara and on the Continent, the EU is a constant topic as well. The Turkish government is carrying out significant economic and political reforms, trying to improve its human rights records to gain EU membership. Meanwhile, Brussels is about to decide on a timetable for Turkey's accession to the Union, and European publications are constantly debating whether Turkey should be admitted.

But under the surface, Turkey is also cultivating relationships with nations more worrisome to the United States and the EU. Turks used to look to the West for political and economic cues. Evening news programs in Turkey gave the weather forecast for Paris and Stockholm but not for Damascus, and the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs refrained from training diplomats in Arabic. But that has changed. Today Turkey has become Syria's best friend, and is drawing closer to Iran than at any time since the era of the shah.

As recently as 1999, Turkey and Syria came to the brink of war because of the latter's support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish terrorist group battling the Ankara government. At the time, Ankara massed troops along the Syrian border, and popular Turkish dailies came out with headlines like, "We will say shalom when we greet the Israelis on the Golan Heights." In November 2002, however, a new government came to power in Ankara, led by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), a party with Islamist roots that now calls itself a conservative democratic movement. The AKP is determined to improve Turkey's relations with the Muslim Middle East.

Since then, Ankara and Damascus have become closer. The AKP has dramatically improved ties with Syria, which is surrounded by Israel, U.S. ally Jordan, and Iraq, through well-publicized bilateral visits--over thirty ministerial-level visits since 2002, including Bashar's January 2004 trip to Ankara, during which he and his wife were showered with media praise. The two nations have signed cooperation agreements in areas ranging from oil and gas to security

affairs. As a result, bilateral trade volume, which stood at $241 million in 1999, jumped to $910 million in 2003.

With Tehran, the story is similar. Ankara still has some qualms about Tehran. Many in the AKP worry about Shiite Iran challenging a predominantly Sunni Turkey. The Turkish military is concerned with Iran's nuclear program, though one AKP politician told me, "Iran's nuclear bomb is only as much a threat to Turkey as Israel's weapon would be." Despite these qualms, in December 2002, the two countries signed a treaty of educational cooperation, paving the way for them to share curricula and exchange students. Trade between the two countries has boomed since the AKP rose to power, growing from $1.2 billion in 2002 to $2.3 billion for the first eight months of 2004 alone. In July, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Tehran to discuss deeper economic, political, and security ties, including a deal to buy Iranian natural gas, though no deal has yet been inked.

The AKP's efforts to improve ties with Syria and Iran have been backed by the Turkish press, whose business interests depend on good relations with the ruling party. Throughout Erdogan's trip, the Turkish media displayed enormous sympathy towards Tehran. They did not mention Iran's past support for the PKK until I raised the topic during a CNN-Turk interview. The day after my interview, Iran declared that it was adding the PKK to its list of terrorist organizations, a list "which does not exist," according to an Iranian Foreign Ministry official. Nevertheless, at the end of Erdogan's visit Turkey and Iran signed a security cooperation treaty stipulating, among other things, a "joint fight against terrorism."

Why have relations between Turkey and these countries changed so radically? The AKP's desire to woo Muslim states is one reason. AKP politician Ahmet Davutoglu, previously a professor at the International Islamic University in Malaysia, and now an advisor to both Prime Minister Erdogan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, argues that Turkey can remain powerful only if it utilizes the "strategic depth" of its neighborhood, developing better ties with those Muslim neighbors with whom it shares cultural affinity. The world is composed of cultural blocs, he writes, and Turkey falls into the "Muslim bloc." Close ties with Israel prevent Ankara from gaining the strategic depth it could otherwise possess through good relations with its Muslim neighbors. Hence, Turkey's future power depends on having good ties with the Muslim bloc, especially nearby Iran and Syria.

But there are other important factors, such as the Iraq war. The war has angered every significant political group in Turkey, from Islamists to leftists to nationalists. The most leftist Turks, harkening back to the 1970s, see the war as a neocolonial effort to achieve U.S. hegemony in the region, and Iran and Syria as a balance to that hegemony. The Turkish daily Cumhuriyet, a vocal proponent of socialism in the '70s and social democracy later, runs regular articles criticizing the U.S. campaign as an attempt to rule the Middle East.

The mainstream liberals, in line with the EU position, reject the war as illegitimate. An old college friend who teaches at a top liberal school in Istanbul told me that when he asked the students in his international law class to come up with term projects on breaches of international law, over 90 percent chose the Iraq war. At the end of my stay in Ankara, I visited Batikent, a pleasant, middle-class suburb of row houses and well-tended rose gardens. Batikent is the epitome of modern liberal Turkey: there are almost no mosques, and I expected to encounter little anti-Americanism there. Yet graffiti all over the neighborhood repeated the same message: "Murderer America, get out of our region."

The nationalists, for their part, are anxious over the U.S. alliance with the Iraqi Kurds, who have gained de facto independence, and worry that chaos in Iraq will seep over into Turkey. One cab driver, whose car was plastered with stickers of the patriotic Nationalist Action Party, told me, "The war is an American effort to establish a Kurdish state in northern Iraq." This is, after all, "what the Americans had been aspiring to do ever since the Gulf War," he added. Fear of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq and of chaos have helped convince the nationalists--who traditionally opposed closer ties with Arab nations--of the wisdom of improved links with Syria and Iran. As for the Islamists, they see the U.S. campaign as an abhorrent assault on a fellow Muslim nation, an assault that increases their sympathy

for the Arab world. Every day during my stay in Turkey, Vakit, an Islamist daily with a diehard cadre of readers, ran at least one article calling the U.S. soldiers in Iraq "bloody murderers who kill Muslims."

Turkey's tilt towards the Middle East is not irreversible, however. The United States has to make sure that events in Iraq do not unfold in a manner that pushes Turkey further away. Over the past few years, Washington has failed to use the kind of diplomacy that worked for years in Turkey, such as visits by high-level American statesmen involving interaction with ordinary citizens, which Turks love. Washington cannot afford to let Iraq devolve further into chaos, a development that would alienate Ankara even more. If it doesn't, one day soon Turkish weather reports might ignore Stockholm and Washington altogether.

Soner Cagaptay is the head of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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