

A Turkish Rapprochement With Middle East Rogue States?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul will make an official visit to Tehran on January 10. This visit comes on the heels of a January 68 trip to Turkey by Syrian president Bashar al-Asad -- the first ever by a Syrian head of state -- during which Asad was showered with praise by the Turkish media. Why is Ankara suddenly at ease with Damascus and Tehran, both of whom have given Turkey headaches by supporting the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and harboring Turkish Hizballah and other Islamist terror groups?

Background

Iran. Relations between Turkey and Iran improved noticeably in 2003, during which four high-level visits took place from Turkey to Iran (two by Gul), and six from Iran to Turkey, including one by Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi. Throughout 2003, Iran claimed to be cracking down on PKK terrorists within its borders, Ankara's most pressing concern vis-a-vis Tehran. In the cultural sphere there were also advances. A December 2003 treaty on educational cooperation between Turkey and Iran stipulates mechanisms for Turkish students to study in Iran, paves the way for the two countries to share curricula (a difficult endeavor, given that Turkey has a secular education system and Iran does not), and provides for reciprocal scholarships.

Syria. Relations between Ankara and Damascus, also marked by high-level visits, improved in 2003 as well. Gul visited Damascus in April; his Syrian counterpart, Farouq al-Shara, traveled to Turkey in January; and Syrian prime minister Mohammed Mustafa Miro went to Ankara in July. The most important visit of the year, however, was Asad's recent trip, during which the Syrian leader carefully avoided controversial issues. One bilateral sore point has been Hatay -- a province transferred by the French to Turkey in 1938 but still claimed by Syria on its official maps. Asad described the Hatay issue as simply a "problem in need of a solution," a toned-down version of more strongly worded Syrian statements on the issue. On Syrian support for the PKK, Asad told CNN-Turk (an affiliate of CNN) that "the PKK has no presence and activity in Syria." Asad's remarks seemed to complement Gul's earlier comment that "Syrians are being extremely helpful in tracking down terrorists." Before leaving Ankara, Asad summarized his successful trip to CNN-Turk: "We have moved together from an atmosphere of distrust to trust."

Why Rapprochement, Why Now?

The recent amelioration of Turkish-Iranian and Turkish-Syrian relations seems rooted in three significant

developments that have taken place in Turkey over the past year. The following is an analysis of these events and how they are impacting Ankara's policy toward Tehran and Damascus:

1. The ascendance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. Although AKP, which rose to power at the end of 2002, claims to have shed its Islamist past and describes itself as a conservative Muslim democratic movement (this weekend, the party is sponsoring an international conference in Istanbul on conservatism and democracy), AKP's Islamist pedigree is clearly making inroads into Turkish foreign policy. Many party deputies nurture deep cultural and religious empathy toward the Muslim Middle East. This explains the AKP's adamant resistance to the war in Iraq -- a position resulting in the Turkish parliament's refusal in March to fully support the American campaign -- as well as the sheer amount of anti-Americanism in the pro-AKP press. Today's conservatives and Islamists in Ankara may be considered by some to be bold in their sympathy for the Muslim Middle East; indeed, some of them are closer politically to Syria and Iran than they are to any other country.

2. The war in Iraq and its ripple effects. The possibility of a Kurdish entity in Iraq has fueled the anxiety of nationalists in Turkey skeptical of U.S. motivations and concerned that the entire Iraq operation was, after all, about the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. Interestingly, nationalists on the right and the left -- including social democrats, among whom the antiwar campaign awakened 1970s-style anti-Americanism -- are united on this point. Also, many in Ankara view Iran and Syria, countries with large Kurdish communities, as possible allies for consultation against a Kurdish polity in Iraq. Asad played to this sentiment during his visit to Ankara, stating that a Kurdish state in Iraq would be a "red line, not only as far as Syria and Turkey, but for all the countries in the region."

3. Turkey's recently improved odds of being accepted into the European Union (EU). The dynamics of Turkish politics have transformed since Turkey received a "promise" in December 2002 that the EU would decide on Ankara's application for membership in December 2004. The sudden and likely prospect of EU accession has made the impossible possible in Ankara. Toward this end, the country has adopted dramatic political reforms to satisfy EU accession criteria (see [PolicyWatch no. 781 \(templateC05.php?CID=1659\)](#)). The promise of EU accession may also be transforming Turkish foreign policy. Just as some of Ankara's objections to the war in Iraq were characterized by the EU's stand on the issue (invoking the need for international consensus before the war), the Turkish position on Iran and Syria also seems influenced by Brussels. With EU accession in mind, Turkey wants to treat its Middle Eastern neighbors a la Europe. Engagement and dialogue, rather than confrontation and containment, are the leitmotifs. (It should be noted that this stance is also reminiscent of Turkey's traditional position toward Syria and Iran before the PKK issue and other problems made the position difficult to maintain in the 1990s).

In the pro-EU camp, there are liberals who think of Turkey and its Middle Eastern neighbors as a trans-border region in the European sense -- an area with improved economic and social ties across the board, in the long-run much like Germany's Ruhr valley, Alsace-Lorraine, and the lower Benelux area. With this in mind, Ankara's new attitude toward the Middle East is that Turkey will be nice to its neighbors as long as they are nice to Turkey.

Are the New Dynamics of Turkish Foreign Policy Here to Stay?

There is, of course, nothing wrong with Turkey sharing good relations with its neighbors. But the question remains: do Syria and Iran make good neighbors for Turkey? After the November 2003 double suicide bombings in Istanbul, the Turkish daily *Milliyet* quoted a police official who stated that the two masterminds behind the bombings, Azad Ekinçi and Habib Aktas, were hiding in Syria and Georgia or Iran, respectively.

Today, the three most powerful determining forces of Turkish politics, namely, conservatives and Islamists, right- and left-wing nationalists, and pro-EU liberals and libertarians, seem to be coming together on a new foreign policy agenda regarding Iran and Syria. This momentous, yet unlikely, convergence now faces a major challenge: opening the gates of the EU to Turkey, which the liberals and conservatives/Islamists mostly support and the nationalists

mostly oppose. In this regard, the greatest foreign policy problem in Turkey this year will be Cyprus, whose solution Brussels is making a condition for Turkey's EU accession. With the liberals and Islamists pushing for a quick solution and the nationalists opposing, the outcome of this debate may also determine whether a new Turkish foreign policy consensus on Iran and Syria will survive the year 2004.

◆ Soner Cagaptay is coordinator of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

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