

The United States and Turkey:

'A Resilient Partnership'

Dec 10, 2003



Brief Analysis

Turkey's Relations with Its Neighbors

Turkey is positioned in what has historically been an unfriendly part of the world, surrounded by neighbors whose political systems are, for the most part, strikingly different from Turkish democracy. Until about six years ago, Turkey had poor relations with most of its neighbors. Today, Turkey enjoys healthy relationships with all of these nations, except for Armenia. This change is due to altered policies on the part of Turkey's neighbors rather than to anything Ankara has done differently. Syria ended its support for the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and now carries out one-third of its foreign trade with Turkey. More recently, Turkey was gratified by the swiftness with which Damascus turned over the twenty-two suspects being sought by Turkish authorities in connection with the November 15 and 20 terrorist bombings in Istanbul. Turkey also cooperates with Iran on terrorism issues. The policies that Iran adopted after the Islamic Revolution are no longer being pursued by Tehran; the project of exporting the revolution and toppling other regimes has been dropped. In the Balkans, the "Turkish Threat" concept once popular in Greece is no longer prevalent, and its demise has precipitated increased regional cooperation. The Bulgarians have accepted the Bulgarian Turks into their society, relieving pressures that fueled conflict between Turkey and Bulgaria in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Turkey's relationship with Iraq will be excellent assuming Iraqis embrace a representative government. As for the relationship with Armenia, it will remain politically restricted until the Armenians give up their territorial claims on Nagorny-Karabagh and accept their internationally recognized border with Azerbaijan.

Terrorism

The recent attacks in Istanbul were a blow against the values that Turkey cherishes. They targeted the path that this predominately Muslim country is successfully taking toward modernity, pluralism, and democracy. Since the end of PKK aggression in the 1990s, Turkey has experienced liberalization and democratization at an incredible rate. The Istanbul bombings were directed against such success and are reflective of an element of society that opposes the modernization of the Turkish Republic. Nevertheless, the attacks have only enhanced solidarity among Turks, who have expressed tremendous empathy for the local Jewish community and embraced its Turkish identity.

Terrorism grows not only from ideological seeds, but from social conditions. To the extent that Turkey develops an advanced social framework, the roots of terrorism will find no place to flourish. The terrorist organizations that have targeted Turkey and other nations are part of an amorphous global network, and Ankara hopes it can turn the Istanbul attacks into a catalyst for unraveling this network. Turkey has been gratified by Syria's cooperation in the wake of these attacks, particularly since the relevant investigations are still in progress and since it is not fully certain whether the terrorists in question had any ties with Syria. Ankara relies on its ability to bring concerns to the attention of the Syrians and persuade them of the best way to conduct relations.

International cooperation against terrorism will be the only possible solution to ending what has become a

worldwide plague. The UN's inability to even formulate a clear definition of terrorism has been an incredible disappointment. More regrettable is the fact that European Union (EU) countries have been consistently uncooperative with Turkish inquiries regarding terrorists who have targeted Turkey and are now residing in Europe. In addition, several organizations that pose distinct terrorist threats to Turkey have yet to appear on the EU's formal list of terrorist entities.

The Peace Process and Relations with Israel

Although the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is currently stalled, the Turkish-Israeli relationship is quite strong. Turkey's relations with Israel are largely independent of this process and will continue on their own merits. The peace process requires a powerful catalyst if it is to flourish once again. Any of several parties can serve in this role: the United States, Israel's Arab neighbors (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon), the EU, or the UN. Turkey, however, cannot be that catalyst. In the absence of tangible peace negotiations, Turkey cannot use its good relationships with Israel and the Palestinians to steer either party in any particular direction (e.g., by telling them which of their policies are wrong). Once the peace process is reignited, however, Turkey can use these relationships to help stabilize the situation.

Turkey and the EU

Turkey deserves to be a full member of the EU. Turkey has already satisfied the Copenhagen Criteria that the EU requires before it can begin accession talks with any candidate country. To be sure, Ankara can make further progress toward implementing these standards. For this reason, it has created a three-minister review group that will make recommendations on how to facilitate implementation at the judicial and bureaucratic levels. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Turkey has already satisfied the Copenhagen Criteria to at least the same extent as the current EU candidate countries (slated to join the union in May 2004) had when Brussels opened accession talks with them in the 1990s.

The Cyprus issue must be divorced from the EU accession issue because it is not part of the Copenhagen Criteria. Yet, this problem should be resolved on its own merits. With regard to UN secretary-general Kofi Annan's plan for settling the issue, Ankara disagrees with the idea that no solution is a solution, as well as with the idea that any solution is a solution. Ankara sees the Annan plan as incomplete insofar as it fails, in sections, to provide for Turkish-Cypriots who wish to retain their Turkish-Cypriot status while remaining on the island.

Turkey and Iraq

Any future government of Iraq, whether it is predominately Shi'i or otherwise, should be representative of all Iraqis, acting in the interests of the Iraqi nation rather than of any particular group or groups within the country. A new government should also use Iraq's natural resources for the benefit of the entire country.

The security situation in central Iraq would be no different if Turkey had created a corridor for the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division to enter the country from the north during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The current troubles in the Sunni triangle are rooted in the realities of the country as a whole, and also in the policies and perceptions in that specific area. These problems would exist regardless of any tactical alternatives that could have been exercised during the war. At the same time, however, Turkey's knowledge of regional political-cultural dynamics could provide the U.S. mission in Iraq with valuable support.

Turkey and the United States

The U.S.-Turkish relationship has been through challenges many times before, and it has emerged from the latest challenge stronger than ever. U.S. and Turkish interests will continue to coincide with regard to Turkey's neighborhood, which includes Israel, Iraq, and the Caucasus. The calmness and maturity shown by both sides in

their recent interactions have instilled further confidence in the strength of the relationship. By virtue of its values and identity, Turkey is the best-situated country in the region (perhaps the continent) to provide the United States with the political and economic assistance it needs.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Brock Dahl, an intern with The Washington Institute's Turkish Research Program.

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