

# Turkish-American Relations:

## Looking to the Future

by [Mark Parris \(/experts/mark-parris\)](/experts/mark-parris)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

#### [Mark Parris \(/experts/mark-parris\)](/experts/mark-parris)

Mark Parris was United States ambassador to Turkey from 1997 to 2000. He has also served as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Israel and political counselor at the U.S. embassy in Moscow. During the Clinton administration, he was special assistant to the president and senior director



### Articles & Testimony

**W**hat does the future hold for relations between the U.S. and Turkey, so recently viewed by one another as "strategic partners"? The truth is it is too soon to tell. But it is far too soon to despair.

Pundits and policy-makers in both countries continue to wrestle with the implications of the unsuccessful March 1 "motion" to permit U.S. forces to invade Iraq through Turkey, and indeed of U.S. intervention there more generally. The March 1 vote was a watershed in terms of the way Turks and Americans look at one another. Iraq is still work in progress. And because of Iraq's importance to both Washington and Ankara, it would be premature to make sweeping predictions about the future course of bilateral relations until the outcome there is clearer.

Yet, as policymakers on both sides turn to the task of redefining U.S.-Turkish relations post-Saddam, they will find that they have plenty of material to work with, and much common ground. Some of the issues involved are dealt with in the articles above: winning the war against terror; ending the Arab-Israeli conflict; stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction; fostering the emergence of good governance and civil societies in Turkey's traditionally tough neighborhood; bringing the energy resources of the Caspian and Central Asia to world markets. All reflect interests that warrant the label, "strategic."

It is also true that, as the focus of Washington's geopolitical calculus shifts inexorably toward the Middle East and South Asia, and as America pays more attention than in the past to the Muslim world more generally, the United States will inevitably find itself time and again having to choose between working with Turkey or working around Turkey. In a sense, Turkey will have the same choice vis-a-vis the U.S. (which, at least for the time being, has become its southern neighbor). In most cases, "with," rather than "around," will prove the best option for both sides. For as far ahead as can currently be seen, therefore, the U.S.-Turkey relationship will be a "strategic" one.

Whether the U.S. and Turkey will be "partners" again in the sense they were in the nineties -- or arguably even during the Cold War -- is to me less clear.

Less clear because an important component of U.S.-Turkish relations since 1949 -- the concept of "containment" -- has dropped out of the equation. Containment of the Soviet Union was the core of U.S. foreign policy for four decades. Containment of Saddam Hussein was a top priority of U.S. foreign policy for another decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Turkey was essential to both objectives. And that made an important difference in the

way Washington looked at Turkey from 1949 to 2003, even during those periods of strain in the relationship.

The Post-Iraq War phase of U.S.-Turkish relations will be unique in our recent history in that there is no overarching threat to contain. Circumstances will arise where Turkish cooperation will be useful from the standpoint of U.S. objectives (e.g., in providing humanitarian relief in Iraq or peace monitors in Hebron). Circumstances will arise when Turkish cooperation may rise to the level of important (e.g., in providing troops to help secure order in Iraq). But it is difficult to identify circumstances where a Turkish contribution will be essential in the same sense that it was in containing the Soviets or Saddam. That is a fundamental difference that policymakers in Ankara and Washington will need to work their way through as we move into the next phase of U.S. - Turkish relations.

Is there a way for Turkey to regain its traditional pride of place in Washington's geostrategic calculations? If so, my guess is that the key will be the extent to which Turkey is successful in implementing ongoing domestic reforms.

A Turkey that has turned the corner toward sustained economic growth, that is giving its citizens a rising standard of living, that is educating its children to seize the opportunities of the 21st Century, that is extending to its people civil liberties taken for granted in mature democratic societies, and that has addressed issues like Cyprus will be a compelling fact to strategists in Washington looking for models of successful Muslim societies.

The reforms in question are of course motivated in the first instance by Turkey's own vision for its future, and by its aspirations for European Union candidacy. But, if implemented, they would provide a sound foundation on which to build a bilateral U.S.-Turkish partnership that will serve the interests of both peoples well into the future. ❖

Afterword to Turkish-American Relations: Past, Present, Future, ed. Cagri Erhan and Mustafa Aydin (Frank Cass Publishers)

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