

Turkey's Future Direction and U.S.-Turkey Relations (Part II)

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Mr. Chairman, in the interests of time, and as there are members of the panel more qualified than I to address Turkey's internal dynamics, I will with your permission focus my prepared remarks on matters relating to U.S. - Turkish relations.

Strategic Partnership

In November, 1999, I had the honor to sit in the hall of Turkey's Parliament Building and hear President Bill Clinton declare Turkey to be a "strategic partner" of the United States.

On March 1 of this year, Turkey's Parliament in that same hall failed to approve the transit of American forces through Turkey to invade Iraq. Ever since there has been a debate on both sides of the relationship as to whether or not U.S.-Turkish "strategic partnership" is dead.

Sometimes lost sight of in that debate is a clear sense of what "strategic partnership" meant when Bill Clinton said the words. From my perspective, the concept comprised three elements:

- First, the emergence, after the end of the Cold War, of a specific set of issues on which U.S. and Turkish interests largely overlapped;
- Second, an explicit recognition by both sides of that convergence of interests;
- And, third, a realization that, by working together, we were more likely to advance our common interests than by pursuing them separately.

The interplay of these three factors produced some impressive results in the late nineties. One could cite, for example, American-Turkish successes in making the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline a reality; in protecting Muslim minorities in the Balkans; or in rolling up the PKK inside Turkey. Even on issues where our perspectives were quite different -- like Iraq -- we found solutions that accommodated each other's interests.

In short, on a wide range of issues that mattered to both societies, and in very concrete terms, we were delivering for Turkey, and Turkey was delivering for us. Not coincidentally, polls at the time consistently showed that Turks viewed Americans as their best friends abroad. And in America, Turkey's image as a reliable ally was finally gaining ground on its reputation as the setting for the film, "Midnight Express."

Lost Ground

I think it is safe to say, Mr. Chairman, that the relationship has lost ground since.

You are probably familiar with polls released earlier this year suggesting well over 50% of Turks today view American policies as the single greatest threat to Turkey's security. Similarly, the typical reaction of average Americans when they find I have served in Turkey, is to ask how such "good friends" could have let us down last spring.

The proximate cause of this dramatic shift has been the U.S. decision to depose Saddam Hussein.

Turks typically view that decision as legally questionable, as a dangerous precedent, and as ill-advised from a geo-strategic perspective. Their doubts have been reinforced by our inability promptly to restore order and essential public services in Iraq. There is a widespread suspicion that Turkish firms are being excluded from programs to rebuild Iraq in order to punish Turkey for the March 1 vote, and that future U.S. economic aid has been conditioned on Turkey's agreeing to dispatch troops to Iraq. Suspicions remain that ultimately the U.S. will accept an outcome in Iraq that leads to the establishment of a de jure or de facto independent Kurdish state.

On the U.S. side, it is clear that, despite disclaimers, official confidence has been shaken that Turkey can be relied upon in the future to play the kind of role that it has in the past in places like Somalia, Kosovo or Afghanistan. There is a lingering sense that Turkey overplayed its hand in negotiations preceding the March 1 vote. And one can hear persistent speculation that Ankara is using the Turkomen population in northern Iraq to pursue a hidden agenda.

It would be easy to conclude, based on things that have been said or whispered in Ankara and Washington since March, that this is a relationship on the rocks -- or dangerously close to them.

Reality Check

It is therefore important to state clearly that the reality is nowhere near as dire.

First, with respect to Iraq:

- Ankara has as much at stake in Iraq's coming out right as does Washington. That gives it a strong incentive to work with us there. And Turkish officials have repeatedly made clear their readiness to do just that.
- At both the official and unofficial level, Turkey has made important contributions during and since the war to helping meet Iraq's humanitarian and practical needs.
- Turkish firms are, in fact, competing successfully for tenders by U.S. prime contractors in Iraq.
- On the U.S. side, meanwhile, it appears simply not to be true that Washington has conditioned new loans to Turkey on any specific quid pro quo regarding Iraq.
- And U.S. actions, by and large, are consistent with its public commitments before and since the war to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity.

I am convinced, moreover, that, as policymakers in Washington and Ankara wrestle with the long-term implications of the dynamics unleashed on September 11, 2001, two in particular will concentrate their minds.

- Turkey will have to come to terms with the fact that America has moved in next door, is likely to remain in the neighborhood a long time, and has brought with it an agenda that will have an important impact on Turkish interests;
- America will inevitably find, as the focal point of its strategic thinking is inexorably drawn to the region surrounding Turkey and to the Muslim world more generally, that we will have to work either with Turkey or around Turkey.

I am willing to venture that both sides will normally find "with" a better solution than "around."

Which gets us to the question of the Bush Administration's pending request that Turkey deploy troops to Iraq.

Turkish Troops to Iraq?

There are those, Mr. Chairman, who see a Turkish decision to send troops to Iraq as a panacea for U.S.-Turkish relations. I am not so sure.

It probably is true that such a decision would restore some of the luster scuffed off the relationship last spring. It would certainly give Turkey a stronger voice in Coalition discussions of Iraq's future. On the other hand, an outright refusal would probably consign official relations to cool correctness for an indefinite period.

But it is not clear to me that a deployment of Turkish forces, should it occur, would prove the boon for bilateral relations that some are predicting. I am struck, for example, by the extent to which Turkey's political leadership has been at pains to differentiate any role Turkish forces might play in Iraq from U.S. policies there. If we get to a point where there are Turkish boots on the ground, I am not sure one can simply assume that Ankara and Washington will always be on the same page. And if, God forbid, Turkish forces should be targeted in the way that the UN and Jordan already have been, whom would the Turkish man in the street hold responsible?

Mr. Chairman, I do not know whether or not Turkey will ultimately decide to send forces to Iraq. I must say it is hard for me to imagine its leaders recommending such a course until they have a good answer to the question of what we are doing to finish off the PKK in the north. On balance, my sense is that the current political and military leadership are trying to find a way to respond positively to our request. But this is not in the bag.

Looking Ahead

What does all this mean for the future of the relationship? Well, obviously, a lot depends on how Iraq comes out. It's hard to speculate in much detail until we know that.

This much, however, I am prepared to predict: U.S.-Turkish relations are going to be qualitatively different in the future from what they were during the era of classic "strategic partnership," or indeed during the past 50 years.

The reason for that has less to do with how Turkey's parliament voted March 1, or whether or not Turkey will send troops to Iraq, than with two fundamental shifts in the underlying dynamics of the bilateral relationship that, I sense, have not been fully digested in either Ankara or Washington.

The first, on the U.S. side, is a function of the fall of Saddam Hussein.

When Saddam disappeared last April, so did the relevance of the concept of "containment" as it applied to Turkey. Containment of the Soviet Union, of course, was the core of U.S. foreign policy for four decades. Containment of Saddam Hussein was a top priority for U.S. foreign policy for a decade more. Turkey was essential to both objectives. And that enabled Turkey from 1949 until this spring consistently to box above its weight here in Washington, in terms of the quality and level of the official attention it commanded.

The post-Iraq War phase of U.S.-Turkish relations will be unique in our recent history in that -- with the possible exception of a nuclear-armed Iran -- there is no overarching threat to contain from Turkey. Circumstances will arise where Turkish cooperation is useful. Circumstances will arise where Turkish cooperation is important. But it is difficult to envision circumstances today in which Turkey's contribution will be essential in the same sense that it was in containing the U.S.S.R. and Saddam. That can't help but make a difference in the way Washington looks at Turkey in the future.

On the Turkish side, the big change is a function of Turkey's evolving relationship with Europe.

After some mixed signals in the late nineties, Europe, at last December's Copenhagen EU summit, promised Ankara an up-or-down decision by the end of 2004 on opening negotiations for EU membership. That is the single biggest

fact in Turkish political life today. A commitment to grasp that opportunity was at the core of the successful election campaign last fall of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development (or "AK") Party. It is AK's highest priority today. Overwhelming popular support for that goal has given AK the parliamentary majority and self-confidence necessary to pass reforms that have the potential radically to transform Turkish politics and society, including in such previously taboo realms as the status of Turkey's military.

Will the EU give Turkey a green light? It is too early to tell. But as this drama plays out, I suspect we will find Ankara more closely attuned to European views than has been the case in the recent past. For some here, especially those who have held up a special relationship with the U.S. as a viable alternative to EU membership, that may take some getting used to.

The Bottom Line

Do the end of "containment" on the American side, and a growing preoccupation with Europe on the Turkish, mean "worse" U.S.-Turkish relations. No. Just different ones.

For reasons that I have already described, America's relationship with Turkey will remain a "strategic" one. My guess is that we will more often than not find ourselves working as "partners," whether or not we formally describe ourselves as such.

One can even envision circumstances under which Turkey could regain the pride of place in American strategic thinking that it enjoyed for the past 50 years.

The key to such an achievement, I have argued elsewhere, is for Turkey to close the gap between the potential that analysts have identified there for years and a reality that never quite measures up. In an epoch that America's enemies would like to make a clash of civilizations, a Turkey that is democratic, prosperous, internally harmonious - - in a word, "successful" -- will be a compelling fact. In Washington. Or Europe. Or for that matter in Baghdad, Damascus and Tehran.

The economic, political and other reforms that have been undertaken by Turkey's previous and current government, if carried to fruition, could produce such a Turkey in the years ahead. That would create the best foundation I can think of for a bilateral relationship that would serve U.S. and Turkish interests as well in the future as "strategic partnership" did in the late nineties.

Soner Cagaptay addressed the committee on this same topic. [Read his remarks. \(templateC07.php?CID=1\)](#) ❖

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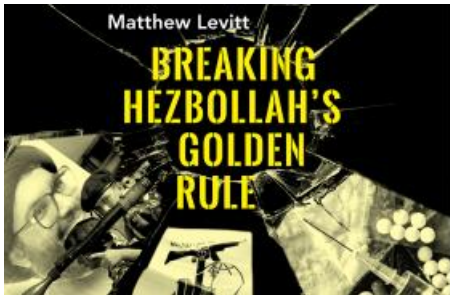


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