

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

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for giving me the chance to come here today and speak about Turkey and the future of U.S.-Turkish relations. It's an honor to have been invited to testify before this prestigious body.

We have a number of issues to discuss today. I would like to focus on three of these topics, namely:

- Turkish-European Union (EU) relations and reforms in Turkey;
- Turkey's role in Iraq, and;
- The future of U.S.-Turkish relations; in order to draw eventual policy suggestions for the sake of this panel.

1. Turkish-EU relations and reforms in Turkey:

Background: A discussion of Turkish-EU relations is germane to our debate since the desire to join the EU is one of the most significant political forces in Turkey today.

Ankara applied to join the EU in 1963, but for decades, little progress was made toward that goal. In this regard, the emergence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) -- an organization on the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organizations list -- in the 1980s played a significant role in delaying Ankara's membership. During the 1980s and the 1990s, the PKK terrorized Turkey, throwing the country into political chaos, and dampening its willingness to carry out the necessary political reforms towards EU membership.

However, things changed in February 1999, when Turkey captured the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan. Left without a head, the PKK declared a ceasefire in February 2000. As violence subsided, Turkey relaxed. Significant reforms, from Kurdish education to new laws on par with the First Amendment, followed.

The future of Turkish-EU relations: Turkey's chance for EU accession seems to have increased after the recent reforms. In December 2004, Brussels will decide whether to offer Turkey an accession calendar, opening the way for eventual Turkish accession into the Union.

For this to happen, Turkey has to satisfy the EU's accession rules, the so-called Copenhagen criteria. So far, the EU's main objection to Turkish membership has been that Ankara does not satisfy the political leg of the Copenhagen criteria. The EU has said that Turkey is a flawed democracy since its military has too much influence over politics. It also objected to Turkish membership asserting that Ankara has a poor human rights record because of its treatment

of the Kurds.

Mr. Chairman, I believe today it has now become difficult to draw such conclusions. Turkey is changing, and it is changing fast. In this regard, for instance, the political powers of the military are now being trimmed. In August, EU reforms civilianized the Turkish National Security Council (NSC), the country's top foreign policy body, in which the military used to enjoy dominance. Today, the NSC is an advisory body with a majority of civilian officials, reporting to the Deputy Prime Minister. A sign of the military's changing role was that, last winter, as Turkey was discussing the Iraq War, the army was conspicuously absent from this debate. Today, it is not a far-fetched conclusion to say that the Turkish military is moving towards becoming an institution of government, instead of an institution over government.

Things are changing also on the Kurdish front. In August, Turkey granted amnesty to the members of the PKK. A lenient new law makes it possible for the PKK's foot soldiers to lay down arms and receive only minimal punishment. On the other hand, with the recent EU reforms, Turkey has given cultural rights to the Kurds, who are now allowed to receive education, run TV programs, and even conduct election propaganda in Kurdish. Accordingly, when it comes to the Copenhagen (political) criterion of "respect for and protection of minorities," Turkey is now in safe territory.

Although the recent reforms have made Turkey a likely candidate for EU accession, I have to admit that I am skeptical about the chances of the EU offering Turkey membership anytime soon.

Mr. Chairman, Turkey may indeed not be a stellar example of Anglo-Saxon democracy. My point is that subsequent to the recent reforms, Turkey qualifies for EU membership at least as much as the countries of Eastern Europe slated to join the EU in May 2004. Some of these countries themselves do not quite possess the perfect record to join the EU, especially when it comes to minority rights.

Let's take two examples: Slovakia and Latvia. Recent reports indicate that last year; around 150 Roma (Gypsy) women were forcefully sterilized in Slovakia. (In most countries of East-Central Europe, the Roma are treated dismally, cast off to modern ghettos). Then, there is Latvia, where the Russian-speaking community faces outright discrimination. Russian-speakers in Latvia lack citizenship and cannot vote or receive passports. I am not arguing that Latvia, Slovakia, or other countries should be kept outside the EU because of their problems. Joining the EU will only help them become better democracies, and indeed in May 2004, these countries will enter the EU.

What puzzles me is that the EU seems to be accepting countries with less than perfect human rights records, while intending to keep Turkey out.

The answer to this lies in understanding the EU's expansion dynamics: in 2004, the Union will take in 10 new countries, with a total population of 75 million people. Almost all these countries have income levels below that of the EU, and will therefore receive significant development funds from Brussels as per the EU's plans to transfer funds from the wealthier countries to the poorer ones. Since the European economies have been growing very slowly, barely over 1%, for the last decade, the EU has very little money to hand out to the poor incoming countries. At this stage, accepting Turkey, with 70 million mostly poor inhabitants, would make expansion challenging for the EU. The EU is not rich enough to deal with Turkey right now. Hence, its unwillingness to offer Ankara accession.

Even if it does not result in Turkey's eventual membership, the desire for EU accession has been beneficial for Turkey by catalyzing political reforms. Today, most Turks see EU membership as a positive development. The EU process is a political avalanche in Turkey. Because of that, no one wants to be caught in the unpopular position of being culpable for blocking Turkey's EU accession. That explains, among other reasons, why the Turkish military, whose powers have been trimmed as a result of the reforms, did not outright object to these changes.

That is also the reason why, over the past 18 months, seven revolutionary reform packages, harmonizing the Turkish political system with that of the EU, have been passed swiftly by the Turkish parliament. In the long run, the

Turks will benefit from the consolidation of their democracy as a result of the EU reforms. Yet, it is important to note that the powerful impetus behind these reforms is symptomatic of Turkey's emerging pro-European bias in foreign policy, especially towards Iraq.

2. Turkey's Role in Iraq

Mr. Chairman, it is possible to say that Turkey's reluctance over the past winter to support a northern front in the Iraq War was at least in part a product of Ankara's desire to align itself with European foreign policy. This attitude is prevalent especially among the foreign policy elite in Ankara. But more importantly, it resonates with Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. Since many outside observers have come to regard the AKP as an Islamist party, or a party with an Islamist pedigree, the party's pro-European bias may come as a surprise. There are two takes on why the AKP has vigorously pursued EU reforms:

- First is that the AKP sees the reform process as a chance to consolidate the Turkish democracy,
- And the second is that the AKP views this process as a means to an end, using the reforms to curb the influence of the military -- the traditional guardian of Turkey's secular democracy -- over politics.

Mr. Chairman, I believe we should judge the AKP not by what we think about it, but rather through its actions. From Washington's perspective, until now, AKP's performance has been mixed. On the one hand, the party has single-handedly passed EU laws, putting Turkey on a much-needed reform track. On the other hand, however, the AKP has not been a consistent supporter of America's Iraq policy. Back in the winter, when the Turkish parliament was voting on American troop deployment in Turkey, while some in the AKP leadership were trying to muster support for this initiative, others were opposing it. A few of them were citing Muslim solidarity as the basis of their objection to a war against Iraq.

There were other reasons why the AKP and Ankara declined to cooperate with the U.S. in the Iraq War. The Kurdish issue was the biggest concern. Many people in Turkey feared that America's Iraq campaign would, in the end, create a Kurdish state there. (The fact that Turkey was not privy to American plans about post-war Iraq exacerbated such concerns). Why was there such a big fear in Turkey over the Kurdish issue? The reason is the PKK, which has 4,000-5,000 militants in northern Iraq from where it has launched attacks into Turkey in the past. The PKK's violence has left over 35,000 deaths behind, creating pains in Turkey whose American equivalent would be the trauma of the September 11 terrorist attacks. For many Turks, the two-decade long fight against terrorism has produced a deep distrust towards the PKK and Kurdish nationalism.

Mr. Chairman, when we review the reasons that underlined Turkey's aversion to the Iraq War back in March, and analyze Turkey today, we reach the following conclusion. The factors that made the Iraq War unpopular still loom large today:

- The AKP government treats EU foreign policy as a yardstick in deciding Turkish policy towards Iraq.]
- The Islamists within the AKP are increasingly more upset with what they see as emerging chaos in Iraq. They are convinced that the situation is only going to get worse, and would like to have nothing to do with it.
- Then, there is a new factor: in the light of the upcoming nation-wide local elections in April 2004, the AKP government, which sees the elections as a vote of confidence as well as a means to consolidate power, has an unfavorable view of sending Turkish peacekeepers to Iraq. If Turkish troops suffer casualties there, this will have negative ramifications for the AKP's success in the April 2004 elections.
- And finally, the PKK is still in northern Iraq. In fact, today, the fear of the PKK is stronger than before: on September 2, the organization renounced its February 2000 ceasefire. This has made likely PKK violence infiltrating from northern Iraq the top item on the Turkish agenda.

If not much has changed in the Turkish view vis-a-vis Operation Iraqi Freedom; the question is can anything be done to clear the air between Washington and Ankara?

3. Future of U.S.-Turkish relations

Mr. Chairman, the key to rebuilding U.S.-Turkish relations goes through establishing a new foundation for that partnership. As I am sure the other speakers will elaborate on it, for fifty years after the end of World War Two, the United States and Turkey built a working relationship that President Clinton named a "strategic partnership" in 1999. This was based on mutual interests: as a superpower, America took care of Turkey's global interests (for example, protecting Turkey against communism during the Cold War; or making Turkey a partner on the energy corridor leading out of the Caspian basin and supporting Ankara's EU candidacy in the 1990s). And as a regional power, Turkey provided America with support in its neighborhood, from the Balkans, to the Caucasus and the Middle East.

The question today is whether Turkey can still provide such support to America. In other words, is Ankara still strategically important for Washington? Some people argue that America does not need Turkey anymore.

Washington may indeed not need Ankara today for all the reasons of the past, but I will argue that in the long run, America will continue to need Turkey.

For example, it is becoming increasingly clear that Turkish assistance in Iraq, whether it is peacekeepers or reconstruction aid, would be beneficial to the U.S. in achieving security and stability there.

The U.S. will need Turkey outside the Middle East too, such as in the Caspian basin, a volatile region with the world's second largest oil reserves. Turkey's traditionally good relations with the countries of the Caspian area make Ankara a desirable partner for Washington in facing the challenges awaiting the Caspian region.

There are many other issues on which Washington and Ankara could continue to cooperate, ranging from the Turkish-Israeli partnership to the War on Terror. In the War on Terror for example, Turkey has had a fantastic record, from running post-war Afghanistan to sharing valuable intelligence with America against terror groups.

Finally, there is the symbolic factor that in the post-September 11 environment, America will be interested in Turkey's success as a predominantly Muslim, yet prosperous and peaceful society.

If it is indeed the fact that Washington needs Turkey, then, the question is does Ankara need Washington? My answer is yes. Who will be Turkey's global partner when, for instance, it becomes clear in several years that the EU is unable to offer Ankara accession anytime soon? I argue that as a regional country with limited power outside its neighborhood, Turkey will continue to need America to guard its global interests.

If American and Turkish interests are likely to overlap in the future, the question whether anything can be done to bridge the gap between Washington and Ankara? The first step towards good mutual relations would be cooperation in Iraq. The U.S. is now Turkey's southeastern neighbor, and if America and Turkey are going to rebuild their relations, they will have to start in Iraq.

Mr. Chairman, the following steps may help Washington develop a better rapport with Ankara in Iraq and beyond:

1. Joint engagement against the PKK: Turkey sees battle against the PKK as a sine qua non of U.S. -Turkish cooperation in Iraq. Besides, if the PKK stays in northern Iraq, this would turn the area into another southern Lebanon, a region of nominal government authority where terrorist groups operate freely. This is not in the interests of the United States, or Turkey or of a unified Iraq.

2. Military to military confidence building measures: For many decades, military relations formed the bedrock of the U.S.-Turkish alliance. While economic, and cultural links between America and Turkey hovered at a minimum (for instance, in 2002, Turkey ranked twenty-ninth among America's trading partners), military relations flourished. Such rapport was not limited to ever-important defense cooperation. Rather, a strong human element lay at the core

of the U.S.-Turkish military partnership, with American and Turkish officers working as colleagues, studying at the same academies, and participating in joint military operations. As a result of such first-hand contact, U.S. military officers developed perhaps the most accurate, and therefore the most sympathetic, view of Turkey and the Turks, becoming one of Ankara's best allies in Washington.

Yet, as indicated by the latest events, including the July 4 incident in Suleymaniye (when American troops detained Turkish special operations forces on the grounds that they were conspiring to assassinate elected Kurdish officials in northern Iraq), things have changed. The complex game played out over the past year between Washington and Ankara over northern Iraq has poisoned U.S.-Turkish military relations to a previously inconceivable level. Many in Ankara believe that the United States is trying to set up a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, and many in Washington are convinced that Turkey is aiming to complicate things there for the United States. Accordingly, little trust can be found today between American and Turkish troops, especially those stationed in Iraq. Thus, as Washington and Ankara negotiate the deployment of Turkish troops to Iraq, a precondition for effective cooperation would be military confidence-building measures, including:

- Increased use of liaison officers,
- Military diplomacy,
- Joint reconstruction work in Iraq.
- Sharing political plans for Iraq's future with the Turks. (This has not been done quite so well over the past year),
- Making Turkey a partner in Iraq's political and economic reconstruction.

3. Beyond Iraq, improve economic relations with Turkey: Develop deeper economic ties with Turkey to buttress U.S.-Turkish relations so that next time Washington and Ankara face a challenge, their bond will not be standing on the single pillar of military to military relations.

The Turkish side: There are many ways for Turkey to step up to the plate and improve relations with the United States. In due course, Ankara will determine what these steps are. But, first, Turkey may find it useful to decide if in the future it will cash in its strategic importance with the U.S., something it has not done so well recently.

Mr. Chairman, before I finish, I would like to emphasize that here, I see a choice for Turkey: if the AKP government refrains from helping America in Iraq or elsewhere, then in Washington's eyes, Turkey will remain a country with unused and, therefore not so valuable strategic importance. On the other hand, if Ankara decides to cooperate with Washington on the many issues troubling its neighborhood, with time, Turkey could once again become a valuable ally to America. Subsequently, the U.S. -Turkish partnership could be built on even firmer ground than before.

Thank you.

Mark Parris addressed the committee on this same topic. [Read his remarks. \(templateC07.php?CID=16\)](#) ❖

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