

Turkey Time

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Articles & Testimony

A high-level Turkish delegation has been in Washington for the past few days to discuss the future of Turkish-American relations. The collapse of bilateral ties in March over Turkey's confused support for America's Iraq campaign has, to say the least, left Washington bitter. Reports indicate that the disappointment with Ankara is so deep that Turkey will be relegated to a marginal role in America's future policy in the Middle East. True, Turkey has not really played along with America during the Iraq war. But, is it wise to throw out the baby with the bath water?

Washington needs to get over its frustration with Ankara. Turkey is the very model of the type of society that America wants to create in Iraq -- a predominantly Muslim, yet democratic and secular nation that thrives on market economics -- and America needs real and symbolic Turkish support in its quest to remake the Middle East. First, however, Turkey has to fully grasp for itself the great role that Ankara can play in America's vision of the new Middle East.

If Ankara were to study Turkish-American relations over the past decade, it would find much worth noting. In the 1990s, the underlying foundation of the bilateral relationship was Turkey's geostrategic importance. Turkey's position between southeastern Europe, the Near East, and the Caucasus made the country an irresistible strategic asset. Without Ankara, America could not stabilize the Balkans, tap Caspian oil, or hope to settle the Middle East conflict. At the nexus of Europe and Asia, Turkey proved a great help to America. In return, Washington looked after Turkey's global interests in Central Asia, Europe, and the Mediterranean. During the Iraq war, though, this partnership collapsed as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) failed to make Turkey's geostrategic importance -- its most valuable possession -- available to Washington.

What those in Ankara ought to realize is that geostrategic location is like foreign cash: an asset if converted, a worthless burden if it is not. If Turkey wants to mend ties with America now, it ought to cash in its strategic value.

Turkey has come to the valley of decision: will it support America's efforts to create a new Middle East, devoid of fundamentalism, poverty, and violence? The optimistic view is that Turkey can contribute significantly to America's Middle Eastern enterprise. First, Ankara can export its best commodity, democracy, to a region whose peoples have chafed under authoritarian rule longer than Eastern Europe suffered under communism. Turks can communicate their experience of establishing democratic institutions to the Iraqi people and the rest of the Middle East. Pairing city governments, setting up exchanges between universities, and running workshops for journalists are some ways

with which Turkey can reach out to the region.

This would result in a compounded benefit for Ankara: Turkey would not only be taking a significant part in the creation of a new Middle East, but would also be demonstrating its sincere intent to help America succeed in what may be Washington's biggest challenge since the Cold War.

To do this, however, Ankara needs to start thinking differently. Over the past year, Turkey has spent too much time focusing on the Kurdish threat in Northern Iraq and too little time on the rest of the country. Accordingly, Ankara still does not have a clear vision of a post-war Iraq. Moreover, Turkey seems not to have fully grasped how Washington's fight against terror, weapons of mass destruction, and dictatorships have changed its thinking vis-a-vis the Middle East. The Cold War is over but a new war has begun. When and if Ankara chooses sides, it will find out that what America wants in Iraq -- a stable, democratic, open, and secular society -- is desirable. A region not at war but at peace with the West, freely trading goods and ideas with the rest of the world, and not exporting terrorism is what Turkey and America both want. Both countries will benefit from such a reality.

Ankara must now step up to the plate and play a more active role in shaping the new Middle East. Washington may indeed be ready for this. Earlier this month, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz said on Turkish television that it is important for Turkey to decide what it wants in Iraq and the Middle East. Such statements should be applauded, for if the United States were to ignore Turkey at this crucial stage, it could potentially lead the country down an alarming isolationist path. Some signs of such a process have already begun to appear in the wake of Turkey's debacle with America. On the other hand, if Ankara were to display a willingness to help create a new Middle East, this would undoubtedly multiply America's capacity to transform this region. This, the optimist would say, could also act as a catalyst towards rebuilding Turkish-American relations on even more solid ground than before. ❖

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