

# U.S.-Turkish Interests:

## Convergence and Divergence

Sep 20, 2002



### Brief Analysis

**T**he U.S.-Turkish security relationship is becoming increasingly important to the stability of the Middle East. The two countries have long enjoyed a friendship based on mutual economic and military interests. Many perceive this to be an ideal relationship between the West and the Islamic world. Americans certainly have an interest in encouraging Muslim countries to develop more democratic societies. Yet, the secular structure of Muslim Turkey may not necessarily be the right model for the entire Muslim world. Any externally imposed model is a recipe for failure; individual countries must possess structures of their own that will allow them to develop secular institutions.

The basic principles of Turkey's secularism developed gradually over the centuries and can be traced back to the Ottoman period. The interpretation of religion in Ottoman society was different than that seen in Arab societies. The Ottoman religious establishment gave a significant amount of power to the civil authorities. These authorities exercised great influence on Ottoman society, so much so that most of the public was more or less prepared to accept Turkey's eventual transformation into a fully secular modern state. This is hardly the case in Arab states.

Moreover, Arab societies have traditionally insisted on a unified Muslim and Arab identity. In contrast, Turkey adopted a secular-national identity, in part because of its centuries-long contact with European countries. Modernization takes time, and nation building is necessary before a state can move into the secular world. These concepts need time to evolve; they cannot be implemented overnight. Despite the rapid movement and absorption of ideas seen in this age, applying one country's mode of governance to another country is a complicated process. Turkey has been on its road for a long time, and a shortcut may not be available. This fact should be kept in mind when considering the prospects for regime change and rapid democratization in Iraq.

### Turkey and Iraq

The policy of containing Iraq has not worked. In 1984, Turkish prime minister Turgut Ozal visited Baghdad in an effort to improve relations with Iraq, but returned with no hope of achieving anything with Saddam Husayn in power. Since then, Saddam's aggressive and arrogant attitude has been a source of worry. Like Americans, Turks feel great unease about the probability of Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction. They are also concerned about Saddam's treatment of the Turkmen and Kurdish minorities in northern Iraq. During the Gulf War, 300,000 Iraqi Turkmen and Kurds took refuge in Turkey.

Yet, on November 3, 2002, Turkey goes to the polls, and Iraq will not be a central issue for voters. The Turkish public is more interested in European Union (EU) membership than any other international issue, and domestic issues take up most of their attention. Almost all levels of Turkish society are exhibiting a substantial amount of discontent regarding domestic problems, particularly given the current economic crisis. Some of this discontent can be traced back to the Turgut Ozal years; despite the many changes that have occurred in Turkey since the early 1980s, some Turks feel left out, still waiting for promised improvements in their everyday lives.

Moreover, the economic crisis has deprived Ankara of a significant instrument of foreign policy -- that is, using economic assistance as a tool for diplomacy. Turkey was able to use this instrument often in the early 1990s, but such activity has been greatly curtailed in recent years. In light of its economic crisis, Turkey has not been able to play the leadership role it had foreseen for itself. This limitation has not changed the fundamental structure of Turkish foreign policy, though. Moreover, the basic parameters of the country's foreign policies will not be subjected to national debate during this elections period, especially the issue of a possible U.S. operation against Iraq. Given its important security implications, the decision on whether and how Turkey would participate in such a conflict will most likely be made by the Turkish military.

#### Turkish Experience with Terrorism

Turkey has experienced a long and difficult struggle with terrorism. The country has suffered from numerous movements looking to achieve change through violent means. Almost every ideological conflict that has emerged on the international stage has been reflected in Turkey's domestic sphere. During the Cold War, the perceived conflict between East and West led to terrorism in Turkey provoked by ideological extremists. When political Islam was on rise at the international level, it manifested itself in Turkish society as well. With the ascent of ethnic nationalism in the early 1990s, Turkey had to undertake its own fight against terrorism based on ethnicity. Due to its unfortunate experience with terror, Turkey has been providing extensive assistance and guidance to the United States in its post-September 11 campaign against terror. For example, high-level security and terrorism experts have been invited to Washington and are being consulted on interrogation techniques. Turkey is also providing advice on how to build and use intelligence networks.

#### EU Accession

The Turkish parliament has formally approved a package of fundamental democratic reforms to improve the country's chances of becoming an EU member. Turkey clearly wants membership, but this desire has not been adequately reciprocated by the Europeans. At the very least, the Turks would like some acknowledgment for the progress they have made toward fulfilling the EU's criteria for membership; unfortunately, such acknowledgment has yet to come.

How much influence does the United States have on the EU regarding Turkey's accession? Although some commentators argue that the United States is a significant player, others suggest that Washington will not have much influence on the EU's decision, especially with regard to the question of Cyprus. The island has been divided since 1974, when an abortive coup by supporters of a union with Greece led to an intervention by the Turkish military. If Cyprus is refused entry into the EU, Greece is likely to veto the union's entire expansion program, affecting the other prospective members hoping to join in 2004. The political process in Washington has restrained U.S. advocacy for Turkish accession as well, limiting the executive branch's ability to exercise its influence on the EU. Nevertheless, the United States can still convey its support for Turkey's membership to its European allies, emphasizing the potential benefits that such a decision would bring to Europe.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ayca Ariyoruk.

Policy #661

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