

After the Ecevit Visit:

Can Turks Pull Together to Complete the Necessary Reforms?

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Brief Analysis

The visit of Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit to the United States last week was a political and public relations success for his administration, but a few questions remain: Can the Turks continue to implement the economic reforms required by the International Monetary Fund, or will there be slippage when the road gets rough? Can Turkey pull together to complete the legislation necessary to meet the European Union (EU) requirements? Balancing regional and international considerations, will Turkey be able to meet the challenge clearly posed by the deteriorating situation in Iraq? Will Turkey sustain the wise course it has taken in recent months on the Cyprus issue? And, perhaps most important for the long-term health of Turkish society, will it be able to seize the opportunity offered by the resolution of conflict in the Southeast and find ways to successfully integrate all of its citizens?

Economic Partnership

Since September 11, Turks have understood that their long-established relationship with the United States has acquired a new intensity. Despite the fact that Turkey is now experiencing the worst financial crisis of its history, the competing elements in this sometimes fractious society have clearly combined forces to support the Ecevit government in its efforts to overcome the immense challenge of economic reform. While Prime Minister Ecevit did not win the concessions on textiles and steel for which his large delegation of businesspeople had pressed, the creation of the Economic Partnership Commission (EPC) scheduled to meet in Ankara next month is an important step in establishing a forum for the development of more specific plans to enhance the trade relationship. During Ecevit's visit, the Bush administration made clear its views on regime change in Iraq. Although Turkish public opinion does not at present support Iraqi regime change, Ecevit came out ahead as a result of U.S. assurances that Turkey would be consulted closely and that Turkey's primary concern -- the preservation of Iraqi territorial integrity -- is shared by the United States.

The timing of the visit was fortuitous -- Phase I of the war on terror has not yet been completed. The meetings held between Prime Minister Ecevit, President George Bush, and Vice President Dick Cheney provided an opportunity for both sides to lay the framework for future cooperation on economic as well as military and strategic fronts. Perhaps the most lasting impact of the visit will be the evident deepening of what has always been a strong military alliance to include a closer relationship in the fields of economics and trade. Turkey's stability in a volatile region is dependent upon modernization of its economy to make it a more competitive player in global markets, as well as other domestic adjustments required by its EU candidacy. The Turkish press reports that the delegation to the United States was warned about too heavy an emphasis on textiles, an area in which Turkey will have a tough time competing with China. If the EPC seeks ways to find compatible areas for trade development between Turkey and the United States, it will accomplish far more in the long run than short-term relief of textile quotas, even if the United States were in a position to give ground.

The Iraq Question

Turkey's leading print journalist, Sami Kohen, recently posed a question that Turks must ask themselves about Iraq. Writing in *Milliyet* on January 4, he asked his readers to consider whether preservation of the status quo in Iraq really made sense. He pointed out that continuation of the current regime is not in Turkey's economic or strategic interests and suggested that Turks should consider whether a democratic and peaceful Iraq should not be Turkey's goal. Upon his return to Turkey, Ecevit is reported to have urged Iraq to comply with the UN resolutions. He emphasized in a television interview that Saddam Husayn should listen to the warnings of the Bush administration. While there is little sympathy or admiration for Saddam among Turks, there is open apprehension that a regime change would result in the dismemberment of the Iraqi state. It is significant that the debate about Iraq has been opened by Sami Kohen and taken up by other prominent and respected journalists. The effort on the U.S. side must be to reassure Turkey that the United States understands its concerns about the territorial integrity of this difficult neighbor.

Baku-Ceyhan

Perhaps the most important development on the political-economic front resulting from the September 11 attacks is a renewed effort toward the implementation of plans to actualize the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline. This route has enormous importance from the standpoint of economic security. It has been reported in the Turkish press that Vice President Cheney discussed Baku-Ceyhan with Prime Minister Ecevit, assuring him that the United States appreciates not only its commercial value, but its economic significance as well. It has also been reported that World Bank president James Wolfensohn has told the Turks that the World Bank supports the project.

Turkey's Role in Afghanistan

One of the issues much debated in both Turkey and the United States is what role Turkey should play in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Turkey is a modern, secular republic with a Muslim majority population. Although even the most secular of Turks, when asked about their religion, will proudly identify as Muslims, it is clear that they have found a way to preserve their religious heritage without forfeiting their adaptation to the global realities of the contemporary world. Of course, the Ottoman Empire included significant parts of Balkan Europe, and the exchange of ideas between the European and Ottoman courts flourished for centuries. For this reason, Turkey was able to implement the Atatürk reforms (modernization, democratization, westernization) without relinquishing its confessional identity.

Although the vast differences between the history and culture of Turkey and Afghanistan might make it inappropriate for Turkey to serve as a model, there are elements in the Turkish approach that deserve emulation. For example, from the early days of the republic until the present time, the Turkish army, drawn from all economic strata and geographic regions, has had a tremendous unifying and democratizing influence. The urban Turk comes together with the village Turk; the illiterate Turk is taught to read and write; those from the east meet those from the west; those from the north meet those from the south; the secular meet the devout; and so on. The army is also an important factor in the immense mobility and lack of class consciousness that characterize Turkish society.

On the economic front, it is evident that the Turks would like to play a role in the actual physical reconstruction of this war-torn country. Turkish architects and builders have worked extensively in Russia and Central Asia. They are familiar with difficult conditions, and they are sensitive to cultural considerations. Turkey will take part in the emergence of the new Afghanistan; the precise nature of that role, beyond the military commitment, should be carefully considered. Accomplished correctly, it could be a triple win: for Afghanistan, for Turkey, and for the United States.

There are also historical precedents for Turkey as a role model for Afghanistan. For half a century, between the 1920s and the 1970s, Turkey served as a model for Afghanistan despite vast historical and social differences. The

Turkish war academies educated Afghan cadets. Afghan rulers attempted to implement secular reforms along the Turkish model. The Afghan king was a friend to Ataturk and visited Ankara in the 1930s. Turkey invested in the infrastructure of Afghanistan. As recently as the 1980s, Turkey accepted some 4,000 Turkic-Afghan refugees who had fled to Pakistan.

Cyprus

Turkey is indisputably a regional power for whom the resolution of various conflicts is essential. The news on the Cyprus front has been most upbeat in recent months. Relations with fellow NATO-ally Greece have been much improved since Greece and Turkey leapt to one another's assistance during the terrible earthquakes of summer 1999. An agreement over Cyprus would remove the most contentious issue between these potentially good neighbors. In this regard, it is important that the tendency to think of Cyprus as a country in its own right -- with both Greek and Turkish populations able to live together -- take hold firmly in the consciousness of the populations of all three countries.

Southeast

On the domestic front, the fact that Turkey has been distracted by devastating economic setbacks has caused it to miss a tremendous opportunity in the Southeast. Having finally won the war on Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terrorism, capturing the now-contrite PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, Turkey must find ways in spite of its straitened economy to do more in the Southeast. The substantial Kurdish populations in Turkey's major cities and the high degree of intermarriage between ethnic Turks and Kurds throughout the country make it imperative that the people of the Southeast be made to feel more a part of the fabric of the country in which they are citizens. Investment, economic development, and a more liberal approach to media and educational issues would go a long way toward the full integration of all elements of Turkish society.

Finally, if there is one objective correlative of the ways in which Turks have pulled together in the wake of September 11 despite their economic woes, it is perhaps the decision of Prime Minister Ecevit to present President Bush with a copy of the Koran. This simple gesture, by the head of the sole secular democracy in the Muslim world, serves as a reminder that there should be no confrontation between Islam and the West. Indeed, the closest of friendships -- based on mutual respect between this modern Muslim society and the United States -- is a bond that will not be broken by the forces of terror or medievalism.

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