

# Ecevit to Washington: Opportunities for U.S.-Turkish Relations

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## Brief Analysis

Visits by Turkish prime ministers to Washington have tended in years past to be low-profile events. With imagination and boldness on the American side, the January 16 meeting between President George W. Bush and Turkish prime minister Bulent Ecevit has the potential to be a watershed in a relationship that will affect vital U.S. interests well into the new century.

### Turkey and America, Pre- and Post-September 11

Turkey's importance to the United States is not news. During the Cold War, it anchored NATO's southern flank. With the collapse of the Soviet Union it became a critical nexus for transnational issues like drugs, organized crime, energy transport, and terrorism. But unlike some other strategically placed countries, Turkey has consistently offered Washington unique added value -- a willingness to put its troops next to U.S. forces in some tough spots: Korea, the Gulf War, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

September 11 and its aftermath have validated Turkey's importance to Washington and highlighted an additional dimension -- the country's Muslim identity. Ecevit's prompt announcement of Turkey's unconditional support for the United States was the first and clearest in the Muslim world; so were his offers to put Turkish combat troops on the ground in Afghanistan and to participate in a multinational peacekeeping force there. Those announcements punctured portrayals of the U.S. response to September 11 as a clash between Islam and a Christian West, and provided cover for other Muslim states, including Pakistan, to support U.S. efforts.

### Opportunities Ahead

Four months into the first war of the twenty-first century, the value to U.S. interests of a prosperous, democratic, militarily capable Turkey is manifest. The range of areas in which Ankara can be helpful to the United States in the months and years ahead includes the following:

- The Afghanistan end game, where Turkish troops will be among the initial peacekeepers, where the Turks are expected to assume leadership of the force from Britain this spring, and where Turks will be training Afghan police and military.
- Iraq, where Turkey will be crucial to the success of any U.S. strategy, from containment to outright invasion.

- Syria, where Turkey's proximity and success in ending Damascus's support for Kurdish terrorists will be relevant in efforts to achieve a definitive break with terrorism there.
- Caspian/Central Asian energy, where construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and an associated gas route will create alternatives to Middle Eastern hydrocarbon sources and help ensure that Georgia and Azerbaijan do not become "failed states" ripe for extremist exploitation.
- The Arab-Israeli arena, where Turkey -- alone among Muslim states -- has the credibility to work constructively with both Israel and its Arab neighbors. (Israel's prime minister has declared that, aside from the United States, Turkey is Israel's most important relationship).
- U.S.-Islam relations, where a successful, modern Turkey illustrates that there is no intrinsic contradiction between Islam and Western values.

#### Ecevit's Visit

Whether or not Turkey is able to play these roles could depend on what happens during Prime Minister Ecevit's visit. He comes at a truly pivotal moment for Turkey. Economic crises over the past year have cut the value of the country's currency in half; contracted its GDP by 8 percent; decimated its middle class, universities, and other institutions; gutted its military modernization budget; and swelled the ranks of unemployed. In response, Ecevit's coalition has stepped up to the task of legislating sweeping, International Monetary Fund (IMF)-mandated macroeconomic reforms to set the stage for a projected recovery in 2002. But this decisiveness has come at a cost: drooping polls for the parties represented in the coalition, incipient public protests, and waxing strength for a well-rooted Islamist opposition.

IMF and World Bank disbursements kept Turkey from hitting the rocks in 2001, and can probably help avoid a new crash this year. But maintaining financial life support will not be enough for the Ecevit government to shake off the trauma of the past year; see its economic reform program through to its conclusion; regain the domestic and foreign investor confidence needed to ignite sustainable growth; and strengthen its role as a force for peace, stability, and modern values in a troubled region.

#### U.S.-Turkey Agenda

The first order of business in U.S.-Turkish relations is not to treat the Ecevit visit as business as usual. A key test will be whether the administration is prepared to cut through bureaucratic resistance and make the case in Congress. If it does, it could use the visit materially to improve chances that Turkey will weather its current economic difficulties and emerge as a stronger strategic partner of the United States.

Specifically, key steps that could be taken by the administration to support common U.S.-Turkish interests include the following:

- Support Turkey's request for additional IMF and World Bank stand-by assistance in 2002, assuming that Turkey maintains its creditable discipline to date on reforms.
- Take steps to shore up Turkey's "real" economy and ease the short-term pain of the reform program. The key here is to increase or preserve access to the U.S. market for sectors that will have maximum impact on Turkish jobs and wages: textiles and steel, respectively Turkey's first and third most important exports to this country. Reflecting their importance to the ability of Turkey to stay the course, Ecevit has stated publicly that such issues will head his agenda.
- Firm up Turkey's military modernization program. Given the frequency with which U.S. and Turkish forces serve together in harm's way, this is simply about protecting the lives of U.S. servicemen and servicewomen. The United States can partially make up for erosion of the lira by forgiving Turkey's FMS (foreign military sales) debt and

transferring excess equipment that will enhance the mobility and effectiveness of Turkish forces. Moreover, the United States can provide assurances that future Turkish purchases of new equipment will not be held up on technicalities, as some past transfers have been.

- Appoint a senior official -- preferably from the political echelon -- to oversee the U.S.-Turkish relationship. This would correct the chronic structural dysfunction arising from the fact that Turkey falls between the European and Near Eastern stools of the U.S. foreign affairs bureaucracy. While the Bush administration is wary of its predecessor's use of bilateral commissions to manage multifaceted relationships with key international actors, Turkey is one case where something like the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission would be of enormous utility in handling potentially difficult issues like Iraq.

- Make unequivocally and publicly clear the U.S. commitment to building the Baku-Tiblisi-Ceyhan pipeline, a project of enormous importance to Turkey (and to U.S. strategic and energy interests).

Few of these ideas are revolutionary; most have been studied extensively at the working levels of government. Adopted in a comprehensive fashion, they would permit Ecevit to return to Ankara confident that the United States appreciates and is prepared to reflect -- in deed as well as word -- the importance of its relations with Washington's most reliable ally in the Muslim world, and one of its best anywhere. Looking to future phases of the war on terrorism -- against the backdrop of America's other global and regional priorities -- this could make a big difference for U.S. interests.

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