

Good Vibes, Little Cash in Store for Ecevit

by [Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

Sep 27, 1999

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.



Brief Analysis

Turkish prime minister Bulent Ecevit's meeting with U.S. president Bill Clinton tomorrow will produce warm atmospherics but no major earthquake-related aid. Washington had planned to make loan guarantees the centerpiece of both its relief package and Ecevit's trip. Reportedly unhappy with what it considered a low figure, however, Ankara indicated virtually on the eve of the meeting that it "does not need" the guarantees.

Last-Minute Surprise. The Turkish decision to forgo the loan guarantees upsets the dynamic of what was expected to be a highly positive visit. It also weakens Washington's hand in the already difficult task of pressing a reluctant Turkey to make concessions on the Cyprus dispute. Turkey reportedly decided that the drawbacks of loan guarantees--possible damage to Turkey's international credit reputation and a congressional approval process that Ankara feared might link the funds to progress on Cyprus--were not worth the sums the Clinton administration was offering. Although the administration's intentions were good, it may have waited too long in putting together its package; the sense of urgency felt after the August 17 quake, and still alive when Congress reconvened after Labor Day, perhaps began to dissipate in recent weeks. The problem lies with a squeezed foreign affairs budget that must make room for U.S. obligations to Kosovars, Israelis, and Palestinians, among others.

After the quake, senior Turkish officials expressed hope that the United States could provide guarantees for some \$5 billion in loans. Based on Turkey's credit rating, Congress would have to appropriate 20 percent of the loan amount as precaution against default. After consulting with Congress, however, the administration reportedly determined that it could only offer the Turks backing for less than \$1 billion. Other requests initially made by Turkey--relief on the military debt, exemptions from Iraqi sanctions, and lifting of textile quotas--never got off the starting block.

This situation is a clear embarrassment to a U.S. government that projects itself as Turkey's best friend. By contrast, the European Union (EU) has come forward with roughly \$750 million in grants and low-interest loans. These relative aid levels might blunt future U.S. criticism of the EU's handling of relations with Turkey.

The "New Ecevit." Despite the last-minute glitch, the Clinton administration will seek to boost Ecevit by making clear its admiration for him. Ecevit received kudos from U.S. officials for his government's lightning-like legislative performance on tough economic and human rights issues during its first 100 days in office. Moreover, he is arriving at a time when U.S.-Turkish strategic relations are at perhaps an all-time high, punctuated by the help the United States gave Turkey earlier this year in capturing Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan--and at a time

of unprecedented popular American sympathy for Turkey as a result of the earthquake.

Ecevit's image in Washington has done an about-face over the past two years--that is, since he became deputy prime minister in mid-1997, returning to an executive position for the first time in nearly two decades. Previously, he was viewed here as an unreconstructed leftist, increasingly nationalist and anti-Kurdish, sympathetic to Iraqi president Saddam Husayn, generally hostile to every U.S. foreign policy aim in Turkey's region, and an impediment to economic reform. Further, the possibility that he could change at his advanced age--now 74, he has been physically frail for some time--was generally dismissed.

But Ecevit has indeed changed significantly over the past two years, as he himself acknowledges. Particularly since the December 1997 EU summit in Luxembourg shelved Turkey's membership bid, Ecevit has embraced the United States as Turkey's best friend and as the nation that "best understands Turkey's importance." He remains uneasy about the long-term implications of U.S. policy in Iraq--which he fears will lead to the creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq--and about the impact on Turkey's economy of anti-Iraqi sanctions. Nevertheless, Ecevit now formally backs the position that Baghdad must comply with the United Nations resolutions before sanctions can be lifted.

In economic policy, Ecevit fought courageously for controversial reforms demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the price of a badly needed stand-by loan. He often went head-to-head with critics from his traditional left-wing constituencies as he passed laws that raised the social security retirement age and granted foreign investors the right to take disputes with Turkey to international arbitration, ending a key barrier to international investment. On human rights, he coaxed a hard-right coalition partner to go along with civilianizing state security courts and offering limited amnesty to PKK fighters. His government has also pledged to increase penalties for torture, a venerable human rights issue in Turkey. In all, the government's first 100 days--a summer period during which Turkish parliaments traditionally vacation--produced more than five dozen pieces of legislation.

Agenda. Even without a major aid package, the Clinton-Ecevit agenda will be full, including Caspian Sea energy issues, Israel, the Balkans, Greek-Turkish relations, and internal Turkish developments like economic and human rights reforms and the Kurdish issue. Clinton probably will make a special effort to put Ecevit's mind at ease regarding Washington's commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity.

As always, Cyprus is the most difficult issue in U.S.-Turkish relations, and the gap between Ankara's and Washington's official positions has rarely been greater than it is today. Washington is eager to see a renewal of talks between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, something Ankara and Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash have been resisting. Still, given Turkey's large role in the Clinton administration's strategic vision, the administration's embarrassment over the aid issue, and the current wave of quake-related sympathy for the Turks, Ecevit will probably be able to finesse the Cyprus issue for now, perhaps with little more than an offer to review the situation in the weeks ahead.

Recognizing the diplomatic and security importance of Turkish ties with Washington--Ankara reportedly buys some 80 percent of its military inventory from the United States--Ecevit will take the aid issue in stride, at least publicly. Given his uneasy relationship with Washington through most of his career, however, the aid issue may indeed affect his more fundamental attitudes toward Washington.

Quake Politics and Diplomacy. The earthquake inspired more than expectations of aid. It also spawned visionary notions that Turkish civil society would soon subordinate military influence in Turkey and that Greece and Turkey would at last find eternal bliss. These claims were exaggerated, of course.

The earthquake did indeed arouse great popular anger at the Turkish government, including for a time the military. But this anger is unlikely to lead to great near-term changes in the Turkish system. Over the longer term, the

earthquake experience may hasten a trend previously underway in Turkey toward more voluntary associations and diminished reliance on government.

Mutual Greek-Turkish displays of sympathy in the wake of one another's earthquakes constitute a potentially important development that increases the openness of the two parties to conflict-reducing and confidence-building measures. Yet, this new atmosphere is unlikely to break the logjam on big-ticket bilateral disputes regarding Cyprus and the Aegean. Even one of the most highly touted developments of "seismic diplomacy"--Greece's announced intention to support Turkey's effort to be named an EU "candidate"--appears to be more a change in rhetorical emphasis than in substance. At this point, the Greek offer seems, as before, linked to unlikely Turkish concessions regarding Cyprus.

"Two-Round" Summit. Ecevit's visit marks the first of what will be an unprecedented two-round U.S.-Turkish summit. President Clinton is likely to visit Ankara for official meetings just before he goes to Istanbul for the November 18-19 summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); afterwards, he plans to make an official visit to Athens. In the intervening weeks, the United States will want to see some movement in the Turkish and Turkish Cypriot position on Cyprus--an issue that will not disappear. Its hope of success on that score will be greater if Washington can come up with the respectable emergency aid package that apparently eluded it on this visit.

Alan Makovsky is a senior research fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

Policy #410

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

TOPICS

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)