

Ecevit's Turkey:

Foreign and Domestic Prospects

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Brief Analysis

Since the Gulf War, Turkey has emerged as a regional power, both in fact and in self-image. Elements of Turkey's new activism include its relationship with Israel, its willingness to threaten to use force when it deems necessary (for example, against the Kurdistan Workers' Party [PKK] in northern Iraq and during the crisis with Syria last autumn), its participation in numerous peacekeeping operations both within and outside its immediate region, and its initiation of regional cooperation initiatives, such as the Black Sea economic cooperation zone. The reasons for this new activism are Turkey's greater prosperity; its stronger, more experienced military; the post-Soviet decline of neighboring traditional rivals (Russia, Iraq, Syria); the opening of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and former Warsaw Pact states; and an alienation from Europe that has somewhat liberated Turkish decision makers from concern about European reaction to their policies.

The Middle East

Syria. Since the October 1998 Adana agreement which ended the Turkish- Syrian crisis last autumn and pledged Syria to halt PKK activities on its territory, bilateral relations have improved. The rudiments of a monitoring system are in place, security officials from the two countries meet regularly, and two Turkish security specialists have taken up posts in Damascus, as called for by the Adana agreement. Turkey is not fully satisfied with Syria's level of compliance but acknowledges that there have been improvements and that PKK attacks across the Syrian border have all but ceased. Some Turkish officials suspect that Iran has now replaced Syria as the PKK's main regional supporter and that Saddam Husayn's Iraq has also stepped up its support of the PKK. Turks are displeased with Lebanon's ongoing refusal -- with Damascus probably pulling the strings -- to join tripartite talks with Turkey and Syria as envisioned in the Adana agreement. Lebanon reportedly is a key entry point for PKK fighters coming from Europe and seeking transit to northern Iraq or Iran.

Israel. Turkish-Israeli relations remain strong and are likely to develop further, both economically and militarily. Top Turkish government officials, including prime minister Bulent Ecevit and deputy prime minister Devlet Bahceli, have indicated their interest in deepening bilateral ties with Israel, as is also seen in Turkish president Suleyman Demirel's visit to Israel in mid-July.

Turks seem relatively relaxed for now about the prospect of a new Israeli government, under Ehud Barak, that is interested in pursuing peace with Syria. In the Yitzhak Rabin-Shimon Peres era, Turkey was anxious about the possibility that its own security interests would be undermined by Syrian-Israeli peace. Now, however, Turkey is far more confident about the durability of its ties with Israel and its military superiority over Syria -- each of which it once feared might be seriously compromised by Syrian-Israeli peace. Nevertheless, should Syrian-Israeli peace become an impending reality, Ankara will greet the prospect with mixed feelings and will seek assurances, for example, that Syrian troops not be massively redeployed to the Turkish border.

Egypt. Since Egyptian president Husni Mubarak's intervention in the Turkish-Syrian crisis last fall, Egypt and Turkey have been building good diplomatic and economic relations. They are discussing a free trade agreement, and Cairo has seemingly ceased its once frequent criticisms of Turkish-Israeli cooperation.

Europe. Disaffection with Europe continues in Ankara, which was disappointed by the European Union's (EU) June 1999 Cologne summit. The summit's final communique did not even mention Turkey or its application for EU membership. The March 1999 NATO summit's emphasis on a European security and defense identity (ESDI), in which Turkey would be assigned an uncertain role, and the Cologne summit's vision that the EU might someday undertake security operations without reference to NATO also worry the Turkish foreign- and security-policy establishment, which fears it could be marginalized in a future European security regime.

The United States. Turkey's relations with the United States are the best they have been in decades. Turks depend on the United States as their most significant ally in NATO and their only ally on issues related to the PKK, the EU, and Caspian Sea energy. Turkey's alienation from Europe has strengthened its need for U.S. friendship and support. Bilateral ties have been further cemented in the 1990s by an implicit trade-off: Turkey acquiesces in U.S. operations in northern Iraq, while the United States, often alone among Turkey's allies, supports Turkey's anti-PKK policies. Of course, the two also cooperate on many other fronts, such as the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

Turkish-U.S. relations are not untroubled, however. From Ankara's perspective, the main concerns are the reliability of the United States as an arms supplier (given Congress's human rights focus), and the situation in northern Iraq, where Turks fear U.S. policies are leading inexorably to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. From Washington's viewpoint, the biggest looming problem is Cyprus, where the gap between the official U.S. and Turkish positions has never been wider. Washington is particularly concerned that the Turkish Cypriots refuse to resume talks on a Cyprus solution unless the Greek Cypriots halt their EU membership negotiations.

The Turkish Internal Situation. Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit's three-party government commands a large parliamentary majority; despite some internal differences, it is likely to be stable and fairly productive on economic and social issues. The government's nationalist bent will be most visible on issues regarding Cyprus and the Turkish-Kurdish issue. Least known of the three coalition parties is the Nationalist Action Party (NAP), which came in second in April elections and which has worked to shed itself of violence-prone and mafia-linked elements that shaped its image for years. The NAP seemingly is trying to redefine itself as a mainstream center-right party. An important key to the workability and durability of the government will be NAP's willingness to refrain from pushing a "pro-religious rights" agenda along the lines it promised to its largely traditionalist constituency. The military, generally backed by Ecevit, continues to insist on firmly anti-Islamist policies and is unlikely to give in on issues such as allowing head-scarved women to attend university. Turkish society has not yet come to a consensus on the appropriate role for Islam, and there is considerable disagreement about where political Islam ends and "religious rights" begin. Political Islam, along with religious rights, remain powerful political forces. The Virtue Party -- the de facto successor to former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party -- finished third with only 15 percent of the vote in the April national elections (compared with first place and 21 percent in 1995), is wracked by internal splits, and is under court threat of closure; nevertheless, it still won the most votes nationally in city council and

mayoral elections, giving it a strong base from which to rebuild nationally.

Abdullah Ocalan and the PKK. Ocalan's apology and abject behavior at his trial provided a catharsis and sense of triumph for many Turks, probably diminishing the emotional need many felt to see him executed. At any rate, with avenues of appeal open to the PKK leader, the question of Ocalan's execution will not likely emerge on the agenda in a real sense for another year or so. The future behavior of the PKK itself, whether or not it continues to fight, could determine Ocalan's fate.

Both Turks and Kurds seem to agree that the PKK has no hope of defeating Turkey militarily. Following Ocalan's approach at his trial, ethnically conscious Kurds likely will focus their demands on language and cultural rights, rather than on independence, federation, or autonomy. The sizable vote in the mainly Kurdish southeastern provinces for HADEP, the pro-Kurdish-rights party that is widely seen as close to the PKK, shows that "dignity issues" -- such as Kurdish television, radio, and schools -- remain active concerns of many Kurds. The Turkish government is not now prepared to take steps on these issues, but they remain topics of lively debate in the Turkish press and are unlikely to disappear.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Benjamin Orbach.

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