

U.S.-Turkish Relations in an Age of Interdependence

Oct 16, 1998



Brief Analysis

On October 14, 1998, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott delivered The Washington Institute's Second Annual Turgut Ozal Memorial Lecture at the Willard Inter-Continental Hotel. The following are excerpts from his remarks. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=141\)](#)

"The association of this event with the name of Turgut Ozal made this truly an invitation I could not refuse....I propose to review the U.S. Government's understanding of Turgut Ozal's legacy to his own country and to the world, focusing on three broad areas: economics, politics, and foreign relations."

Economics: "That is the field in which President Ozal's influence has perhaps been most enduring...For over a decade, Ozal had been preparing Turkey for the challenges of a global marketplace... The result has been a quiet economic revolution that has given Turkey a competitive advantage in both good times and difficult ones...."

Politics: "I realize that the issues of democracy and human rights are sources of occasional friction in Turkey's relations with the United States, and also with other countries that wish Turkey well."

"...Ozal worked to build bridges across many of the social and cultural divides that still delineate the fault-lines of Turkey's political culture. For instance, he supported the Turkish military throughout his years in office, working to ensure that the armed forces were well-equipped...and to ensure that Turkey could continue to be a good, strong ally of the United States in what...is in its essence and will continue to be in its essence a military alliance. At the same time, however, he worked to ensure that, as in other democracies, the nation's soldiers took orders from the civilian leadership, and not the other way around."

"[He also made a] career-long effort to reconcile the sacred and the secular in Turkish life. He saw no contradiction between reform and modernization on the one hand and, on the other, his own deep personal belief in the predominant faith of Turkey's citizenry."

"The republic (Ataturk) helped found has institutionalized the principle that the best way to protect the freedom of people to believe and worship as they choose is to separate religion from government...We share Turkey's belief that this division is nothing less than an insurance policy against the danger that the practice of religion will be exploited for political ends.... Some of our Turkish friends and partners were confused and even angered when, in January of this year, the United States expressed its concern about the Turkish Constitutional Court's closure of a religiously-oriented political party...We believe that limiting avenues for legitimate political activity...carries with it the risk of an unintended consequence: it may turn moderates into extremists, who will then provoke further curtailment of freedom, and undermine the health of democracy itself....(Some say) that what makes Turkey so important to the United States is 'location, location, location.' But another thing that makes Turkey and the United States natural allies and partners is 'values, values, values.'"

"Ozal (also) built a bridge to the large number of Turks who are of Kurdish origin, whose presence in Turkey has been chronically, deeply and often violently troubled....The United States supports Turkey's right to defend itself against terrorists...But we also believe, as do many Turks, that there can be no solely military solution to the problems that

continue to plague Turkey's southeast, and that any enduring answer to Turkey's Kurdish question will depend on the willingness of the Turkish government to safeguard the human rights of all the people of Turkey.

Foreign Relations Caucasus and Central Asia: "Ozal (in 1991) saw our collective response to the emergence...of fifteen independent nations from the ruins of the old USSR as the most pressing and daunting challenge facing the international community at the end of the twentieth century....In the years since, Turkey has...been a leader in pursuing trade and economic cooperation with the Russian Federation. It has initiated a number of programs of education and training in the Caucasus and Central Asia, aimed at encouraging and assisting those countries in the development of the kind of secular democratic system that has served Turkey so well for most of this century. Turkey's activism in this region will help bring into being an East-West Energy Transportation Corridor that will literally power Turkey's future economic growth and generate improvements in the living standards of the Turkish people....This Administration remains committed to the Caspian Basin Initiative and to the strategic imperative of developing multiple transportation routes for bringing oil and gas to world markets....Our plans and our policy continue to feature the prospect for a pipeline running through Baku to Ceyhan...."

Armenia: "...Armenia...has suffered terribly in history, especially in this century, and it is also a nation with which the United States feels strong bonds of its own. It is now time for Turkey and Armenia to consider what further steps might be taken to build a stronger, more stable bilateral relationship."

Middle East: "...Ozal enhanced Turkish relations with key Arab states, while at the same time he laid the groundwork for improved relations with Israel. That was as sensible as it was far-sighted, since Israel, like Turkey, is a bulwark of democracy in the region. Prime Minister Yilmaz's recent visit to Jerusalem will help buttress that critical relationship."

Greece/Cyprus: "We hope to see more of that same path-breaking statesmanship in Turkish policy toward the Aegean, where President Ozal built still more bridges in Turkey's relationship with Greece. Among the many challenges in the Aegean today, the most pressing is to find a solution to the decades-old conflict on Cyprus....The United States has made very clear its grave concerns about the introduction of Russian S-300 missiles into Cyprus. At the same time, we have also made clear that if such destabilizing missiles are installed, we will oppose any effort to remove them by force."

European Union: "We...continue to hope that Turkish politicians and commentators will not make this issue the be-all-and-end-all of Turkey's success and self-esteem. Turkey's ties to Europe are irreversible and unbreakable and organic...The U.S. has urged the E.U. to find ways to bring Turkey more fully into the process of enlargement....We do not believe that European unity and integration will be fully successful if a key European country is set uniquely alone and apart....Many of the obstacles blocking Turkey's path to EU membership today are of Turkey's own making...But precisely in order to increase the chances that Turkey will make further progress in these areas, it is important for the EU to say clearly and unequivocally that it is holding a place for Turkey when it is ready...."

"Let me also pledge (to our Turkish friends) that, as you continue the work-in-progress begun by your Founding Fathers three quarters of the century ago, the United States will remain proud to be at your side."

[Excerpts from the question-and-answer session] "The points of agreement (in U.S.-Turkish relations) are stronger, more numerous, and more compelling than those issues on which we disagree...I subscribe 110%, for reasons Turgut Ozal foresaw even before the Cold War was technically over...(to the idea that) the U.S.-Turkish relationship has even more of a hardheaded, geopolitical, strategic rationale in the post-Cold War period than it had during the Cold War...."

"Countries which trample the rights of their citizens end up paying a price in terms of political viability and stability of the state itself. When the U.S. talks to its friends, it tries to be respectful of their sovereignty, yet also tries to couch

the argument in terms of realpolitik, as well as what might be called 'moralpolitik.'"

This report was prepared by Sulay Ozturk. ❖

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