

Congressional Testimony

Is There a Clash of Civilizations? Islam, Democracy, and U.S.-Middle East Policy

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On September 14, 2006, Soner Cagaptay testified before the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia's hearing on Islam, democracy, and U.S. policy toward the Middle East. The following is the prepared text of his remarks.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am submitting my full testimony for the record and will summarize my statement. In discussing the question of a clash of civilizations between the West and Muslim countries, I would like to elaborate on Turkey's recent drift away from the West.

In the post September 11 world, as a secular democracy deeply entrenched in Western institutions, Turkey emerged as a pivotal country in debunking the argument of a clash of civilizations. Yet, my recent observations lead me to believe that Turkey's unique position as a country anchored in the Western world is being challenged. The rise of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in November 2002 is a milestone in this process. Hence, I would like to focus my discussion today on the gap that has emerged between Turkey and the West since the AKP's rise to power.

Turkey's foreign policy orientation before the AKP. Until November 2002, Turkish foreign policy was quite predictable. Ankara cooperated enthusiastically with Washington, whether in the Middle East or in the Balkans. Turkey aligned itself with Israel and kept at arms length from Middle Eastern neighbors such as Syria and Iran. On the European front, Ankara pursued an aggressive policy of European Union (EU) accession.

Turkey's foreign policy orientation since the AKP's rise. Today, though, the picture looks much different. U.S.-Turkish relations are strained on almost all Middle East issues. From their views of terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah to dealing with Iran and Syria, the US and Turkey have developed vastly disparate positions since the AKP's rise to power

How did we get here? In the runup to the Iraq War in March 2003, the AKP-controlled parliament in Ankara refused to allow the creation of a northern front. After that, the AKP took issue with the Iraq War, and sharply criticized U.S. policies in Iraq. Later on, the AKP castigated other U.S. policies in the Middle East. The AKP's anti-American rhetoric has caused a shift in Turkish public opinion towards the United States, while the party has pursued rapprochement with Muslim states in the Middle East. Accordingly, Turkish and American views of the region have diverged significantly.

For instance, while the U.S. has aimed to isolate Syria internationally, Turkey has pursued a policy of rapprochement with Damascus. Relations between Ankara and Damascus have improved noticeably since 2002 with the help of high-level visits. Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul and prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan have visited Damascus numerous times. In return, Syrian foreign minister Farouq al-Shara and prime minister Mohammed Mustafa Miro have visited Ankara. The most important visit encapsulating the rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus was Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's January 2004 trip to Turkey. Whereas only a few years ago, Turkey viewed Syria as an enemy country due to Damascus's support for the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the AKP showered Asad with praise. Before leaving Ankara, Asad summarized his successful trip to Turkish network CNN-Turk: "We have moved together from an atmosphere of distrust to trust."

Relations between Turkey and Iran have also improved noticeably since the AKP's rise. During 2003, for instance, four high-level visits took place from Turkey to Iran (two by Turkish foreign minister Gul), and six from Iran to Turkey, including one by Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi. Since 2003, Iran has claimed to be cracking down on PKK terrorists within its borders, Ankara's most pressing concern. Advances were also seen in the cultural sphere. A December 2003 treaty on educational cooperation between Turkey and Iran creates mechanisms for Turkish students to study in Iran, provides for reciprocal scholarships and facilitates the sharing of curricula between the two countries (a difficult endeavor, given that Turkey has a secular education system whereas Iran does not). Although lately there have been signs that Turkey supports the European initiative to block Iran's nuclearization, enhanced ties between Ankara and Tehran make it very hard to believe that the AKP government would ever, for instance, join international sanctions against Tehran, let alone take part in aggressive action to challenge Iran's nuclearization.

While the AKP has pursued a policy of rapprochement with Syria and Iran, Turkish attitudes toward the United States have soured significantly. Four years of harsh criticism of American foreign policy in the Middle East—U.S. military incursions into Fallujah in 2004, for example, were officially called a "genocide" in Turkey—have created what could be a permanent dent in public opinion. Whereas in the pre-AKP period typically more than half of Turks expressed favorable views of the U.S., a June Pew Center survey showed that only 12 percent of Turks view America positively. In that study, the United States is favored worse in Turkey than in Egypt or Jordan.

Some of the blame lies with Washington. America's unwillingness to take action against the terrorist PKK in northern Iraq is a source of frustration. Lately, Turkish casualties resulting from PKK attacks have been mounting at a rate close to that experienced by U.S. forces in Iraq. The civilian carnage in Iraq itself has added to the Turkish frustration.

Yet, there is something peculiar about anti-Americanism in Turkey under the AKP. Whereas in the pre-AKP period the Turks were America's best friends in the Muslim world, today they have the least favorable opinions of the United States.

The AKP is also alienating Turkey's other traditional ally in the region, Israel. A good example came earlier this year when Erdogan invited the leader of Hamas's military wing, Khaled Mashal, to Ankara, despite criticism from the West and pro-Western Turks. The AKP continues to defend the visit, keeps contacts with Mashal, and opposes Western efforts to isolate Hamas.

Mr. Chairman, the AKP's alternative is the Muslim Middle East. The party has demonstrated an intense and bizarre interest in all "Muslim causes." Last month, at the onset of the Israel-Hizballah war, Erdogan lambasted Israel for trying to "wipe out the Palestinians" in Lebanon. On the same day, a PKK terror attack killed five Turkish soldiers. But Erdogan failed to mention the PKK in his speech. Erdogan's foreign policy gives the impression that Muslim causes are more important than Turkish ones.

The AKP's change of tone on the Mideast isn't without consequences. The Turkish media have run virulently anti-Semitic articles—a dreadful development in a country that has prided itself on saving Jews who fled the Spanish Inquisition as well as the Nazis. A recent anti-Israel demonstration in Istanbul attracted around 100,000 people. Before the AKP, anti-Israeli protests would have drawn just a few hundred diehard jihadists.

Mr. Chairman, as I mentioned earlier, the AKP challenges Turkey's Western orientation not only through its foreign policy initiatives, but also through its words. The party leadership almost always describes regional issues in the Middle East as religious and cultural conflicts, shaping Turkish public attitudes on such issues through the prism of a clash of civilizations.

For instance, AKP leader Erdogan has more than once characterized the Israel-Hezbollah war as a religious conflict, stating that "mothers and sons are being martyred in Lebanon." Such rhetoric suits more the year 1099 and the Crusades than Turkey, which is negotiating entry into Europe today.

In another incident, in 2005 Erdogan spoke at the Arab League summit in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, saying "The West uses terrorism to sell us weapons." Such remarks show where Erdogan thinks Turkey belongs—not in the West, but strangely enough, in the Arab world. (The Arab countries showed a better sense of national identity vis-à-vis Erdogan: they turned down Turkey's application to join the Arab League, saying Turkey is not an Arab country).

Why does the AKP pursue such policies? If Islamist ideology constitutes one part of the party's foreign policy calculus, domestic aspirations are another. The AKP's conundrum is that it is not supported by a majority of Turks, and the party has therefore used a populist foreign policy that bashes the West to boost its domestic standing.

This is working: Not only are Turkish attitudes toward the United States spoiling, but the AKP now draws broad domestic support from its foreign policy. If Turks think of themselves as Muslims first in the foreign policy arena, then one day they'll think of themselves as Muslims first in the domestic one. A telltale sign of the growth of Islamist sentiments is the surge in Islamist media. In the last four years, Islamist newspapers have boomed in Turkey. Combined circulation figures for the Islamist press have almost tripled to more than 1.1 million today from 441,200 in 2001. Another alarming sign is changing Turkish attitudes toward the Christian faith. According to the June Pew Center report, today only 15 percent of the Turks have favorable opinions of Christians.

Mr. Chairman, some policy realists may suggest that Turkey's ongoing drift away from the West is an internal matter and that it is more important to promote a short-term AKP commitment to Washington's policy objectives in the region, such as encountering Iran's nuclearization. This does not seem viable. Here is why.

Recently, Turkey approved a motion to send peacekeepers to Lebanon. In demonstrating how far Turkey has drifted away from the West and toward the Muslim world, Erdogan countered public objections to sending peacekeepers to Lebanon, saying that "Turkey would neither disarm nor harm Hezbollah." With that promise, the Turkish parliament approved sending peacekeepers to Lebanon. If the AKP's Turkey needs to be convinced to take part in peacekeeping operations in Lebanon only on the condition that Hezbollah will not be confronted, how will the same government ever join any action against Iran? And let's not ignore the fact that according to a recent German Marshall Fund survey, under the AKP, Turks have come to like Iran more than they like the United States: Today 43 percent of Turks have a favorable opinion of Iran. This means that for every Turk who likes the United States, there are three Turks who like Iran.

The AKP experience in Turkey shows that, once in government, Islamist parties bring about change in unexpected ways. The AKP's foreign policy is scratching away the Turks' sense of national identity, while infusing Turkish society with a strong sense of Muslim nationalism. In the rift between the West and the Muslim world, Turkey is fast approaching the tipping point at which "the cat will not walk back." Whether this transformation continues depends on if the United States takes the right steps to address Turkey's most serious concern in bilateral ties: the PKK in northern Iraq. There is some promise in this regard: Washington has recently prioritized the PKK issue with the appointment of a special envoy, Gen. Joseph Ralston, to discuss cooperation against the PKK. A second factor that will determine Turkey's future is the Turkish elections of 2007. Will secular, Western-minded Turks, long unable to provide a captivating political message, successfully challenge the AKP, and will the United States support such an initiative? If not, a second AKP government might well turn Turkey into an unrecognizable country—somehow democratic, superficially secular, and definitely not Western.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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