

TURKEY: PARTNERSHIP ON THE BRINK

Zeyno Baran

Is Turkey turning away from the United States? On the surface, it certainly looks that way. The number of Turks with a positive view of the U.S. has dropped steadily, from 52 percent in 2000, to 30 percent in 2002, to only 13 percent as of June 2008, according to the most recent Pew poll. Seventy percent of Turks consider the U.S. an “enemy.” These numbers are particularly dismal compared to those of other countries polled: only 60 percent of Pakistanis, 39 percent of Egyptians, and 34 percent of Russians and Chinese hold the same views.

The numbers are all the more shocking given the strategic partnership, reinforced by NATO, that has existed between Turkey and the United States for over half a century. No alliance between two democratic countries can survive such negative perceptions; the United States can no longer afford to take the partnership for granted.

When asked, U.S. officials as a rule are dumbfounded by the negative poll results. They simply cannot understand how these results have come about, given the hospitality they receive and the overwhelmingly positive stories relayed by American tourists. Of course, in a country of over 70 million people, American officials and tourists mainly have exposure to a minuscule group which tends to be the most accustomed to dealing with Westerners.

One could argue that Turkey is simply one of many countries in which the popularity of the U.S. has plummeted due to the policies of the Bush administra-



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tion. Why should it be treated differently than, say, France or Germany? The answer is simple: unlike other European and Asian allies, Turkey is undergoing an identity crisis, and it is not certain that it will emerge from it with a pro-Western orientation. Faced with political and economic challenges, Ankara may turn inwards and adopt a more nationalistic and Islamic identity, making it an outlier in the NATO alliance. Given its geography—neighboring Iran, Iraq and Syria to the south, Russia and Ukraine to the north, the Balkans to the West, and the Caucasus to the east—Turkey’s tilt away from the Atlantic Alliance would have grave consequences for America’s interests in these volatile regions.

The transformation of the Turkish state

Turkey is unique among countries with a majority Muslim population: it is a secular democracy where the majority of its Muslims do not see any incompatibility between Islam and pluralism. Even though this has been the case for the past 85 years, Americans seem only recently to have realized Turkey’s “Muslimness.” In its fight against al-Qaeda and Islamist terrorism after 9/11, the Bush administration has launched a campaign aimed at promoting Turkey as an inspiration for the rest of the Arab and Muslim world.

When in November 2002 a party and a leadership with an Islamist past was elected to office, some in Turkey became concerned about the possibility of creeping Islamization. For the U.S., the fact that former Islamists could be elected by playing according to democratic rules of the game—and not through the use of violence or extra-legal means—was a

huge success story that needed to be shared with other Muslim countries. However, in being promoted as a possible role model, Turkey’s secular credentials were ignored; the evolution of Islamists to “Muslim democrats” was seen as much more interesting—and much more easily duplicated elsewhere. Indeed, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) defined itself as a Turkish equivalent of a West European Christian Democratic party, maintained the pro-EU orientation of the country’s foreign policy, undertook bold political reforms, and oversaw moves towards economic liberalism. Given that the AKP embodied all the critical traits of a moderate Islamic party, the Bush administration sided with it at critical moments.

This alliance of convenience led to a perception within the traditionally pro-Western secular camp that the U.S. wanted to turn Turkey into an “Islamic democracy,” which is anathema to the founding principles of the country. The Turkish Republic was established in 1923 as a secular republic. The end of the caliphate and the Islamic *shari’a* legal system—and the institution of a separation between mosque and state—were truly revolutionary moves. Most Muslim countries still have *shari’a* law enshrined in their constitutions, something which has impeded their democratic evolution. For its part, Turkey has evolved as a democratic country because it has kept religion out of politics.

Domestic polarization reached dangerous levels in the spring of 2007, on the cusp of the presidential elections in Turkey. Devout Muslims and Islamists disappointed in the AKP’s first term rightly considered the presidency to be the most important hindrance to greater Islamic rule—given that the holder of that office is the only person who can veto criti-

cal appointments. The AKP's base thus pushed the leadership to "conquer the presidency," and expected the AKP to deliver on its unfulfilled promises in its second term—above all, on adopting a change in the constitution allowing women to wear the Islamic headscarf. Certainly there are many more urgent issues facing the country, not least improving women's overall equal treatment and opportunities. Yet the headscarf issue has, over the years, become the single most important priority for key AKP supporters, serving as a symbol of political Islam.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan reportedly hoped to become president, but when faced with strong opposition, accepted a "compromise candidate." However, the party's base insisted on someone from the Islamist camp, and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül was subsequently nominated in April.

To many, the move confirmed suspicions about the AKP's "hidden Islamist agenda." Mass demonstrations took place against the possibility of an AKP president—a development that would give the party full control over the executive and the legislature, along with the ability to influence the judiciary, effectively putting an end to the separation of powers. Some were openly calling for the military to interfere; it came closest to doing so that April, when it posted a strongly worded statement on its website. But this so-called "e-coup" backfired, strengthening national desires for a democratic way out of the impasse. The most memorable slogan of these rallies, "No *shari'a*, no coup!" perfectly summed up the two poles pulling the country apart and the desire of the majority for a democratic consensus.

With Gül's presidency blocked, the AKP called early elections in July. The ruling party was able to benefit from the polarized atmosphere to a greater extent than its opponents, and received 47 percent of the vote in the national election. Such an unprecedented victory further emboldened the Islamist base; the AKP dropped many of its accommodating and compromise-seeking positions in favor of confrontation. Many AKP supporters also interpreted the strong showing for the party as a referendum on Gül's presidency, leading Prime Minister Erdogan to go ahead with the nomination. As a result, for the first time, the Turkish Republic is led by a president and a prime minister who both have Islamist backgrounds (and whose wives both wear the Islamic headscarf).

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Without giving the country time to digest such a major change, the AKP set about restructuring the parameters of domestic power. It commissioned the drafting of a new constitution, itself a laudable move since many wanted to see a new "civilian" constitution eventually replace the one drafted by the military after its 1980 coup. Yet the timing and the nature of the AKP's effort caused concerns that constitutional change was being driven by a religious agenda. The AKP focused heavily on the headscarf issue, neglecting other significant EU reform proposals. Moreover, some in the AKP made clear that once headscarves are allowed in universities, these freedoms would "of course" be extended to public office.

It is worth noting that polls indicate only one percent of women see the ban on headscarves as a reason not to go to university.

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Throughout 2007, the primary divide was between those whose greatest fear was the threat to democracy (from a military coup) and those whose greatest fear was the threat to secularism (from the Islamists). All sides said they supported secularism, but they had very different understandings of the term. To the horror of those concerned about creeping Islamization, Bülent Arınç, a former speaker of parliament, said in 2006 that “secularism must be redefined” and later declared, “We will elect a religious president.” Prime Minister Erdogan agreed, underlining that “secularism is not a way of life; states can be secular, but people cannot.” However, for the opponents of the AKP, secularism *can* be a way of life, in the same way that for many in the AKP and its Islamist base, Islam is a way of life—an all-encompassing one.

This tug-of-war came to a head in March 2008, when Turkey’s chief prosecutor filed a case with the Constitutional Court charging that the AKP had become “a center of anti-secular activities” and asking that the AKP be shut down and 71 of its members banned from elected office for five

years. In June, the Court overturned the controversial headscarf law the AKP had passed, and the countdown began for a possible ban on the AKP by the end of the summer. Political parties that violate the constitution, such as the articles guaranteeing secularism, have traditionally been held accountable under Turkish law. The Constitutional Court has banned 24 parties since it was established in 1963.

The Court’s deliberation on the case was swift, and the decision came sooner than many had anticipated. On July 30th, the Court announced that the AKP will not be closed down for undermining Turkey’s secular structure. The Court fell one vote short of the seven required to shut the Party down. However, it issued a serious warning, identifying the AKP as “the center of anti-secular activities.” It also voted to cut more than half of the AKP’s funding from the Treasury. While the Court’s decision did not fully please either side, it provided some much-needed breathing room for both camps to reevaluate their positions and options.

For its part, the U.S. has remained rather out-of-touch with these developments. Worse still, it has unknowingly played into the fears and concerns of both camps. Seemingly unaware of the changes in the everyday lives of ordinary Turks, especially in small cities and towns, U.S. officials kept repeating the mantra that the AKP was undertaking democratic changes in the country in accordance with EU requirements. A critical look at the governing party’s record, however, reveals that while the government has indeed undertaken important political and social reforms, these have been disproportionately focused on issues that expanded the “freedoms” of the conservative religious base. Little atten-

tion has been given to the concerns of liberal Muslims, such as the Alevi community, which make up about 20 percent of Turkey's population.

There are many examples of questionable AKP influence. In general, it has become impossible to say anything critical about the government and still be considered mainstream and pro-democracy; journalists and members of the business community are either co-opted or silenced for actions perceived as being anti-government. Yet Washington has not expressed concern about such critical areas in Turkish democracy—mainly because the success of the AKP as “Muslim democrats” became an end in itself, and also because the AKP government has positioned itself as the pro-American and pro-EU party, while the opposition has adopted an anti-American, anti-EU position.

Shifting priorities

The AKP, now in power for nearly six years, has presided over significant changes in Turkish society. Since 9/11, and especially after the Iraq war, the Islamic dimension of Turkish national identity has risen in prominence—and importance. There is now far greater awareness among Turks of their Islamic identity, culture, and norms; an increasing number of Turks consider themselves Muslim first, Turkish second. These changes extend to foreign policy as well. The AKP has embraced closer relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds as part of what the AKP's most significant advisor, Ahmet Davutoglu, has called “strategic depth”—balancing relations with the West and with the country's immediate neighbors while forming new relationships elsewhere, mainly economic and political, and thereby increasing Turkey's influence. Instead of acting as part of

the Western alliance, this view puts Turkey in the middle, where it can pick and choose when and in what form it will act in unison with the West and when it will act on its own.

The shift in Turkey's foreign policy has sometimes been described as a move towards a “neo-Ottoman” approach, in which Islamic identity and Middle Eastern interests play a greater role. According to this vision, which is popular across the national ideological spectrum, Turkey has special cultural, historic, and religious links to countries of the former Ottoman Empire and its allies, and can become a major power by being more actively involved in this vast geography. With the U.S. increasingly seen by Turks as simultaneously a negative and less influential force, and with the EU focused on its own identity and enlargement issues, Turkey has had leeway to pursue a more active diplomacy in its neighborhood. The move is logical; almost all the ethnic groups that exist in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia are also present in Turkey. Davutoglu and other AKP advisors rightly argue that instability in these regions is consequential for Turkey, requiring Ankara's active engagement in support of regional security and development. The policy also aims to increase Turkey's influence as an “independent” actor and valid interlocutor for the Muslim east and south. Turkey's recent activism in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which brings together 56 mostly Muslim-majority countries and other Islamic groups, is very much part of this equation.

Turkey's leadership hopes to place the country among “the 10 biggest and most powerful countries” by the Republic's 100th anniversary (2023), as Prime Minister Erdogan

recently asserted. For this to happen, the AKP and its supporters have been increasingly acting out of rational national interest. For members of the neo-Ottoman school, the main argument against joining directly in the Iraq war was that Turkey should not be aligned with powers that would inevitably be perceived as occupiers. Similarly, Turkey's initiative to bring Israel and Syria together has shown that at a time when the U.S. is not able to exert effective influence in the region, countries like Turkey can go their own way to good effect. Ankara is also actively engaged in trying to mediate between Iran and the U.S., hoping to significantly contribute to ongoing Western efforts.

The Kurdish quandary

If Islamism represents the first "red line," then the second is that of Kurdish separatism. The 2003 Iraq war and developments since have severely damaged bilateral relations between Washington and Ankara. For the Bush administration, Saddam's retention of power in Iraq was a major source of instability for the region. Turks, on the other hand, had a different opinion. With Iraq both a neighbor and a former part of the Ottoman Empire, Turks were more attuned to the country's complex ethnic and religious makeup. Most of all, however, they feared the potential fallout of post-Saddam Iraq. The Turks did not see a U.S. plan for preserving Iraq's territorial unity, and they were extremely concerned about the prospect of an independent Kurdistan emerging as a result of the conflict—a development that would revive separatist sentiments within Turkey's own Kurdish population, as well as those of Iran and Syria.

The concern was not simply academic. The Kurdish separatist insur-

gency spearheaded by the PKK had led to some 40,000 deaths during the 1990s, and displaced large numbers of Turkish civilians. After PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was arrested in Syria in 1999, the PKK had declared a unilateral cease-fire. But the Turks, aware that many PKK fighters had found safe haven in northern Iraq, were rightly concerned about the reemergence of PKK terror in a post-Saddam vacuum.

There was also enormous fear about the economic impact of a potential conflict. Ankara claims that it lost nearly \$70 billion in indirect revenue as a result of the 13-year embargo on Saddam Hussein's regime, and has received no compensation either from the U.S. or from the UN. Furthermore, the humanitarian costs could be significant—the 1991 Gulf War saw half a million Kurdish refugees move into Turkey virtually overnight.

Though American and Turkish officials negotiated for several weeks on the terms of a northern front against Iraq, the Turkish parliament in the end voted to oppose participation in such a measure. This completely unexpected decision forced the U.S. to dramatically alter its military plans; Washington ended up having to work exclusively with the Kurds of northern Iraq. This reorientation had consequences. For the first several years after the March 2003 overthrow of Saddam, the U.S. military proved unwilling to compromise its relations with the Kurds in Iraq by going after PKK terrorists.

From the resumption of PKK attacks in 2004 until late 2007, Turks grew increasingly upset with the United States. Despite American assurances that the two countries were "allies against terrorism," the perception was that the U.S. was doing nothing to assist Turkey in its "war on

terror” against the PKK. President Bush had declared in his January 2002 State of the Union address that “so long as nations harbor terrorists, freedom is at risk. And America and our allies must not, and will not, allow it.” The PKK, however, now enjoyed safe haven in an area under U.S. control in northern Iraq. This smacked of hypocrisy, and Turks held the U.S. responsible for the resulting bloodshed.

Turks were further frustrated that the U.S. would not let them conduct their own operations against the PKK in northern Iraq. They remembered well the successes of the 1990s, when Turkish security forces launched a series of ground and air operations across the border with the objective of creating a security zone to prevent PKK infiltrations. But after 2003, the U.S. did not want the “only relatively stable area” of Iraq to become destabilized by Turkish attacks, and they did not approve of any cross-border strikes.

A breakthrough was finally achieved in November 2007 at a White House meeting between President Bush and Prime Minister Erdogan, in which Bush declared the PKK a “common enemy” of the two countries. Subsequently, military-to-military contacts intensified and deepened, and the U.S. began providing Turks with real-time intelligence with the tacit understanding that it would be used in Turkish anti-PKK operations. And since December, the Turkish armed forces have launched a number of air strikes on PKK targets in northern Iraq.

This conflict precipitated Turkey’s invitation for Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, an ethnic Kurd, to talks for the first time since the war, marking a breakthrough in bilateral relations. Direct dialogue with the Kurds (first in Baghdad then in London) has

followed, and subsequently, Prime Minister Erdogan went to Baghdad in July—the first visit of a Turkish Prime Minister in 18 years. This reflects the fact that, whatever Turkey’s problems with the PKK, its ultimate goal is parallel to that of the United States: a united, secular, and strong Iraq, with an “Iraqi” national identity, rather than a country that is divided along ethnic or sectarian lines.

Looking ahead

Certain things will happen before the end of President Bush’s term in office, and how the U.S. deals with them will to a large degree set the tone for the incoming administration. The single most important issue will be Washington’s handling of developments affecting the nature of Turkish democracy. Will it be interpreted as secular or Islamic? Liberal or repressive? With a ban on the AKP no longer likely, there is a risk that Turkey watchers will check the democracy box and move on. That would be a huge mistake, as it would only add to suspicions that the principal interest of the U.S. is in supporting a “Muslim democracy” and not necessarily a Western one (that could join the EU).

Even for Turkey specialists, developments over the past months have been difficult to comprehend. Just when the chief prosecutor made his case for the AKP to be shut down before the Constitutional Court, high-profile detentions and arrests of those charged with coup plotting took place. For the first time in Turkish history, such arrests included two retired generals. Under the so-called “Ergenekon” case, Turkish authorities took more than 100 people into custody, with nearly 50 of them arrested for coup plotting. While such an act would clearly be unconstitutional and

require punishment, among those critical of or opposed to the AKP there is a widespread belief that the government is using the case as a way to intimidate and silence opponents. Following the detention of some well-known public figures, whose pictures were published on the front page of newspapers, few dare to express their dissent—for good reason. Reportedly, nearly one million people have had their private conversations, written and spoken, taped and, when needed, used against them. As a result, there is a climate of fear prevailing in the country—especially among those liberal democrats accustomed to their right to dissent, which is one of the most important elements of a healthy democracy. It is clear that neither secular Turkey nor the AKP will go down without a fight. The U.S. has little ability to intervene in this much-delayed confrontation, which may take months or years.

While both the McCain and the Obama camps have recognized Turkey's importance in the greater Middle East, it is destined to remain a second-tier foreign policy issue, given the number of urgent crisis situations now confronting the U.S. Still, there are some basics that Washington needs to understand about Turkey. First, NATO's only Muslim member is indeed unique—there is no need to try to fit it into a “Muslim democracy” model for others in the “Muslim world.” It is simultaneously Eastern and Western, Southern, and Northern. It will not fit into any pre-made mold. Moreover, neither democracy nor secularism in Turkey fits any known model.

That is why a simple U.S. policy of support for Turkey's membership in the EU is not sufficient. Which EU should Turkey join, and which Turkey should join the EU? Is it the Franco-

German-Russian axis, or the Polish-Romanian driven group of “new allies” that seriously care about post-Soviet issues? Will it share U.S. views on key threats? Is it the more Islamic Turkey (which the EU will not accept) or the secular Turkey (which needs to be updated to meet today's norms)?

The longer-term question for the U.S. is how much Turkey's Islamic identity will come into conflict with its Western one. There are consequences to this transformation. If the country becomes more Islamic, then Turks cannot blame the EU for not wanting Turkey to join. EU membership is not an entitlement—its members have shared values. More and more, Europeans consider resurgent Islamic identity (within Europe and globally) as a challenge to their perception of a largely post-Christian secular order.

And what would happen to Turkey within NATO if it adopts a more explicitly Islamic identity? Turkey has served as a leading member of the Atlantic Alliance, but it so far has done so as a Western country, like all the other members—a role that may prove difficult, if not impossible, to sustain in the future. Moreover, the prevalent anti-Americanism among Turkish youth may pose longer-term challenges. What will be the consequence of a generation coming of age with its first exposure to the U.S. being the Iraq war, Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib and all sorts of anti-American and anti-Semitic propaganda? It will be critically important for the next U.S. administration to invest in greater outreach, so that the younger generation in Turkey gains a better understanding of both NATO and the U.S. If it does not, Washington risks making the current rift between the two countries lasting, and permanent.

