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Troubled Partnership

U.S.-Turkish Relations
in an Era of Global
Geopolitical Change

F. Stephen Larrabee

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Summary

A strong security partnership with Turkey has been an important element of U.S. policy in the Mediterranean and the Middle East since the early 1950s. It is even more important today. Turkey stands at the nexus of four areas that have become increasingly critical to U.S. security since the end of the Cold War: the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus/Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf region. In all four areas, Turkey's cooperation is vital for achieving U.S. policy goals.

However, in the last few years—and especially since 2003—U.S.-Turkish relations have seriously deteriorated. The origins of many of the strains can be traced back to the first Gulf War. However, the strains were significantly exacerbated by the fallout from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, which resulted in a serious deterioration in Turkey's security environment. As a consequence of the invasion, sectarian violence in Iraq increased, and the Iraqi Kurds' drive for autonomy and eventual independence gained greater momentum. (See pp. 11–20.)

Turkish officials fear that the creation of a Kurdish state on Turkey's southern border could intensify separatist pressures in Turkey and pose a threat to its territorial integrity. These fears have been exacerbated by the resumption of an insurgency by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has stepped up cross-border terrorist attacks against Turkish territory from sanctuaries in northern Iraq. These terrorist attacks are Turkey's number-one security concern. (See pp. 25–29.)

The U.S. reluctance to take military action against the PKK or to allow Turkey to take unilateral military action against PKK sanctuaries in northern Iraq after the 2003 invasion caused serious strains in

Washington's relations with Ankara. It also provoked a sharp rise in anti-American sentiment in Turkey, which, if not halted, threatens to pose serious long-term consequences for the U.S. security partnership with Turkey.

These strains have been compounded—and to some extent reinforced—by differences over policy toward Iran and Syria. Whereas the United States sought until very recently to isolate both countries, Turkey has pursued a policy of rapprochement with Iran and Syria. As a result, U.S. and Turkish policies toward Iran and Syria have been increasingly at odds. This divergence began to manifest itself before the assumption of power in Ankara by the Justice and Development Party in 2002, but it has become more pronounced since then. (See pp. 34–40.)

Iran's nuclear ambitions could become a further source of strain. Turkey is concerned by Iran's nuclear program because such a program could stimulate a regional arms race, which could force Turkey to take compensatory measures. However, Turkey is strongly opposed to a military strike against Iran, fearing that a strike would lead to further destabilization of the Middle East. A U.S. military strike against Iran would create a crisis in U.S.-Turkish relations and could prompt the Erdoğan government to halt or curtail U.S. use of Turkish military facilities, particularly the air base at İncirlik. (See pp. 36–37.)

U.S. defense cooperation with Turkey has undergone a downturn in the last few years. Congress has held up a number of major weapon sales to Turkey due to Turkey's human-rights policy and policy toward Cyprus. Turkey has begun to regard the United States as a less-than-reliable defense partner and has expanded its defense relationships with countries that impose fewer procurement restrictions, particularly Israel and Russia. The U.S.-Turkish defense-industry relationship has stagnated lately. Until Sikorsky finalized a sale of 17 Seahawk helicopters in fall 2006, no U.S. firm had won a major direct commercial sale in Turkey since 2002. (See pp. 77–87.)

Revitalizing U.S.-Turkish Relations: The Policy Agenda

The arrival of a new administration in Washington presents an important opportunity for repairing the fissures in the U.S.-Turkish security partnership and putting relations on a firmer footing. President Barack Obama's visit to Ankara in April 2009 helped to set a new tone in relations. But the visit needs to be followed up by concrete steps in a number of areas outlined below if the U.S.-Turkish security partnership is to be infused with new vitality and strength.

Northern Iraq and the PKK

The United States should increase its political and intelligence support for Turkey's struggle against PKK terrorism. U.S. support for Turkey's struggle against the PKK is regarded by Turkish officials as the litmus test of the value of the U.S.-Turkish security partnership. The visible increase in anti-American sentiment in Turkey in recent years has been driven to an important degree by a perception that the United States is tacitly supporting the Iraqi Kurds. Strong support for Turkey's struggle against the PKK would have an important political-psychological impact on Turkish public opinion and help undermine this widespread perception. (See pp. 119–120.)

In addition, the United States should put greater pressure on the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to crack down on the PKK and cease its logistical and political support of the group. Such pressure would have a positive impact on Washington's relations with Ankara and weaken the growth of anti-American sentiment among the Turkish public. However, anti-American sentiment in Turkey has complex roots and reflects more than just discontent with President George W. Bush's policy toward Iraq and the PKK. Thus, any shift in U.S. policy is likely to take longer to have a positive impact on public attitudes in Turkey than elsewhere in Europe. (See p. 120.)

The PKK threat cannot be resolved by military means. A strong antiterrorist program is essential, but to be successful, it must be combined with social and economic reforms that address

the root causes of the Kurdish grievances. The Erdoğan government's "Kurdish Opening," launched in the summer of 2009, represents an encouraging sign that the government is beginning to recognize this. The initiative has sparked an intense internal debate in Turkey. If the initiative proves to be a serious effort to address Kurdish grievances, it could significantly reduce tensions between the Turkish authorities and the Kurdish community in Turkey and contribute to the wider process of democratization in the country. (See p. 120.)

The United States should strongly encourage and support Turkey's efforts to open a direct dialogue with the leadership of the KRG in northern Iraq. There can be no stability on Turkey's southern border over the long term without an accommodation between the Turkish government and the KRG. This does not mean that Turkey should recognize an independent Kurdish state, but for regional stability to exist, Turkey needs to work out a *modus vivendi* with the KRG. Ultimately, this can only be achieved through a direct dialogue with the KRG leadership. The Erdoğan government has taken important steps in this direction since late 2008. Indeed, the two sides appear to be moving by fits and starts toward a rapprochement. However, the rapprochement is fragile and needs strong U.S. support. (See pp. 120–121.)

As the United States withdraws its forces from Iraq, it needs to intensify efforts to defuse tension between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad. This growing tension represents a serious threat to Iraq's viability as an integral state and could seriously complicate Turkey's security challenges. The U.S. military presence has acted as an important stabilizing force in northern Iraq and helped prevent tension between the Iraqi Kurds and Arabs from breaking out into open conflict. But U.S. leverage and ability to influence the situation on the ground in Iraq will decline as the United States draws down its military forces. Thus, the United States needs to intensify efforts to get the two sides to resolve their political differences—especially their boundary disputes—*now* while Washington still has some political leverage. The United States should maintain some military presence in northern Iraq as long as possible without violating the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement signed with the Maliki government at the

end of 2008. This could help prevent current tension from escalating into open conflict as the two sides seek to resolve their political differences. (See p. 121.)

The Middle East

U.S. policymakers should avoid portraying Turkey as a model for the Middle East. The notion of Turkey as a model makes many Turks, especially the secularists and the military, uncomfortable because they feel it pushes Turkey politically closer to the Middle East and weakens Turkey's Western identity. In addition, they fear that it will strengthen political Islam in Turkey and erode the principle of secularism over the long run. The latter concerns are particularly strong within the Turkish armed forces. (See p. 121.)

The United States should continue to express a readiness to open a dialogue with Iran and Syria and to engage both countries in diplomatic efforts to help stabilize Iraq as it draws down its forces there. Such a move is unlikely to lead to dramatic changes in Iranian or Syrian policy overnight, but it would make it harder for the two regimes to blame the United States for the poor state of bilateral relations and could open new possibilities for enhancing regional stability over the longer run. At the same time, it would bring U.S. and Turkish policy into closer alignment and reduce an important source of friction in U.S.-Turkish relations. (See pp. 121–122.)

Washington should also intensify its efforts to persuade Tehran to abandon any attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. A nuclear-armed Iran would have a destabilizing impact on security in the Persian Gulf region and could spark a nuclear arms race in the Gulf and Middle East, a race that could have important consequences for Turkish security. To date, Turkey has shown little interest in developing its own nuclear deterrent, and it is unlikely to do so as long as the U.S. nuclear guarantee and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) remain credible. However, if Turkish relations with Washington and NATO deteriorate, Ankara might be prompted to consider acquiring a nuclear deterrent of its own. This underscores the

importance of maintaining close U.S.-Turkish security ties and keeping Turkey firmly anchored in NATO. (See p. 122.)

Eurasia and the Caucasus

The United States should support recent efforts to promote an improvement in relations between Turkey and Armenia, particularly the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border. The normalization of relations between Ankara and Yerevan would significantly contribute to enhancing peace and stability in the Caucasus. It would also enable Armenia to reduce its economic and political dependence on Russia and Iran. Thus, a normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia is strongly in U.S. interests. (See p. 122.)

The Obama administration should work closely with Congress to prevent the passage of an Armenian genocide resolution. Passage of such a resolution could cause the Erdoğan government to come under strong domestic pressure to take retaliatory action against the United States, possibly curtailing U.S. use of İncirlik Air Base. Such a move would have a strongly detrimental impact on the ability of the United States to resupply its forces in Afghanistan and could complicate the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq. At the same time, Turkey should be encouraged to address more openly the events surrounding the mass deaths of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman authorities in the final days of the Ottoman Empire. Clarification of the events during this tragic period is a prerequisite for a durable and lasting reconciliation with Armenia and would enhance Turkey's reputation as an open and modern democratic state. (See pp. 122–123.)

Turkish Membership in the European Union

The United States should continue to support Turkey's membership in the European Union (EU). Turkey's integration into the EU would strengthen the EU and help put to rest the claim that the West—especially Europe—is innately hostile to Muslims. This could have a salutary effect on the West's relations with the Muslim world. Indeed,

a moderate, democratic Turkey could act as an important bridge to the Middle East. Conversely, rejection of Turkey's candidacy could provoke an anti-Western backlash, strengthening the forces in Turkey that want to weaken Turkey's ties to the West. Such a development is in the interest of neither the EU nor the United States. (See p. 123.)

However, given the sensitivity of the issue of Turkey's EU membership among EU member states, the United States should support Turkish membership through quiet diplomacy behind the scenes and avoid overt pressure and arm-twisting. Such tactics are likely to cause resentment among EU members and could even hurt Turkey's chance of obtaining membership. At the same time, Washington needs to recognize that Turkish membership in the EU—if it occurs—would alter the tone and character of U.S.-Turkish relations over the long run. Although Ankara will continue to want strong security ties to Washington, Turkish leaders would look increasingly to Brussels rather than to Washington on many issues once Turkey joined the EU. As a result, Turkey's foreign policy would likely become more “Europeanized” over time. (See pp. 123–124.)

Turkish-Greek Relations and Cyprus

The United States should intensify efforts to get Greece and Turkey to resolve their differences over the Aegean. Although Turkish-Greek relations have significantly improved since 1999, differences over the Aegean continue to mar bilateral relations and pose a threat to stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. Unless these differences are resolved, there is a danger that some incident could escalate out of control and lead to armed conflict, as almost happened over the islets of Imia/Kardak in February 1996. At a time when NATO faces serious challenges in Afghanistan and the post-Soviet space, the last thing the United States needs is a new crisis in the Aegean. (See p. 124.)

The United States should also encourage and support the intensification of the intercommunal dialogue being conducted under UN auspices between the two Cypriot communities. Although the danger of Turkish-Greek conflict over Cyprus has receded in recent

years, the lack of a Cyprus settlement remains an important obstacle to Turkey's aspirations for EU membership. Progress toward a settlement of the Cyprus dispute would give Turkey's membership bid critical new momentum at a time when accession negotiations have visibly slowed. It would also contribute to greater overall security and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. (See p. 124.)

Defense Cooperation

In the wake of the Obama visit, Washington should initiate a broad strategic dialogue with Ankara about the future use of Turkish bases, particularly İncirlik. Given Turkey's growing interests and increasingly active policy in the Middle East, Ankara is likely to be highly sensitive about allowing the United States to use Turkish bases, especially İncirlik, for Middle East contingencies. The United States therefore cannot assume that it will have automatic use of Turkish bases in Middle East contingencies unless such use is regarded as being in Turkey's direct national interest. (See pp. 124–125.)

Ballistic missile defense could be an important area for future U.S.-Turkish defense cooperation. In light of the growing threat posed by the possible acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran, the United States should explore missile-defense options, both bilaterally and through NATO, to ensure that Turkish territory is protected against the growing threat posed from ballistic missiles launched from the Middle East. (See p. 125.)

Democratization and Domestic Reform

The United States should encourage Turkey to undertake further steps to revitalize the process of democratization and domestic reform. Although the Erdoğan government pursued a reformist agenda during its first several years, the process of democratization and domestic reform has slowed since 2005 and needs new impetus. These reforms are necessary not only to give Turkey's EU-membership bid

new traction—they are also important in their own right independent of Turkey's desire to gain admittance to the EU. (See p. 125.)

The United States should not overreact to the growth of religious consciousness in Turkey. Turkish Islam is more moderate and pluralistic than Islam elsewhere in the Middle East. Turkey's long history of seeking to fuse Islam and Western influences dates back to the late Ottoman period. This history differentiates Turkey from other Muslim countries in the Middle East and enhances the chances that Turkey will be able to avoid the sharp dichotomies, ruptures, and violence that have characterized the process of political modernization in the Middle East. Moreover, the more democracy, pluralism, and tolerance there is in Turkey, the less threatening the growth of religious consciousness will be. (See pp. 125–126.)