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The Turkish Strategic Challenge After the July Elections

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- Turkey's secular system will continue to be challenged as the Islamic Justice and Development Party (the AKP) gradually pulls Islamic values further into public life.
- The AKP leadership has done wonders for the Turkish economy, but that is only part of the story. AKP critics state that the party is seeking to subvert Turkey's institutions.
- Anti-Americanism has become rampant. Anti-Israel feelings are also pervasive, and after terrorist attacks against two Istanbul synagogues and anti-Semitic articles in the media, many Turkish Jews live in fear.
- Washington and Jerusalem should do everything they can to put U.S.-Turkish and Turkish-Israeli relations back on track, including restoring the U.S.-Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership.

American, European and Israeli policy-makers are attempting to figure out what the future of Turkey will look like and how to build relationships with this strategically important but difficult country. This will not be an easy task.

On July 22, Turkey's AKP scored an impressive victory in parliamentary elections, winning an unprecedented 47 percent of the vote, up from 34 percent in 2002. Turkey's secular system will continue to be challenged as the AKP introduces its Islamic agenda and challenges the military, the presidency, the court system and the universities, all of which are still staunchly secular.

The AKP is not the steadfast U.S. ally that its predecessors often were. Nor is it a true friend of Israel. AKP leaders threaten to reorient Turkish foreign policy away from the U.S. and the West, and toward Islamic countries. The negative implications of such a development on the chances for a successful resolution of the Iraq imbroglio, and for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, are clear.

Turkey is critical to U.S. relations with the Muslim world; it is a bridge to the Middle East, a successful democracy, and an important energy transit country. Washington must work harder to

engage Turkey, ensuring that the country continues to look toward the West in its politics and policies.

Economic Success vs. Islamization

The U.S. State Department and the media have praised the Turkish elections as a vindication of democracy and a guarantee of another five years of a stable investment climate. It is true that the AKP leadership has done wonders for the Turkish economy. Foreign investment rose from \$9.6 billion in 2005 to \$19.8 billion in 2006; inflation has declined to 4 percent after years of double digit rates; and per-capita income has jumped from \$2,598 in 2002 to \$5,477 today. These metrics are routinely praised by bullish Wall Street and Turkish investors alike.

But the economic numbers tell only a part of the story. While the economy has surged, the AKP has masterfully exploited divisions between the secular and the religious sectors of Turkish society to expand its grip on power, with potentially dire implications for Turkey's foreign policy orientation.

The AKP's pre-election propaganda stated that Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul's nomination to the presidency (which triggered the early elections) was blocked because he is Muslim and that this "injustice" could be "undone" by voting for the AKP.¹ The message was effective: The 12 percent increase in AKP votes coincided with a 10 percent increase in the number of Turks who identify themselves as Muslim first and Turkish second.²

This divide is likely to exacerbate current tensions among political, religious, and ethnic political groups, especially the large Kurdish minority, and lead to greater instability. These brewing conflicts threaten Turkey's secular model, its attractiveness to foreign investment, and the current wave of domestic prosperity. The AKP victory raises questions about the increasing role of religion in this previously secular state and possible reactions from secular quarters, including Turkey's powerful military. The prospects for Turkey achieving EU membership (a development which had already been stalled by French and German opposition) will now be even dimmer for the foreseeable future. The AKP victory also has major implications for Turkish relations with the West in general and with the U.S. and Israel in particular.

The End of Secularism?

AKP critics state that the party is seeking to subvert Turkey's institutions. The bulwark of the secular system, the presidency, is a critical political office and has several significant powers, including a legislative veto and the power to make key state appointments.

The AKP landslide, coupled with the new and growing divide between Muslims and the secular, raises the specter of an AKP "secret agenda" that could haunt the country. Specifically, critics fear the creeping Islamization of Turkey, especially if an AKP president is put into office this coming fall.

The AKP has already attempted to criminalize alcohol and adultery, while allowing the formerly banned *turban* (an Islamist women's headdress) into the public sphere. The AKP also tried to allow graduates of *imam khatibs* (Islamic religious schools) to be allowed into universities, something that Turkish law and the country's universities currently oppose.

The AKP's renewed mandate and a future AKP presidency may allow Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to push the envelope further. Despite the AKP's major win, it has not achieved the absolute majority in parliament necessary to nominate its president. The party emerged 27 votes short, with 340 seats out of 550 total, and will need the support of the opposition or independent members to elect the next head of state. If it can gain that support, it may score another significant victory.

The Turkish president nominates justices to the Supreme Court and approves appointments of general officers and university presidents. Undermining secularism through weakening the military, the court system, and academia could pave the way for further Islamization.

In the meantime, the appointment of Islamists to the lower rungs of the state and provincial bureaucracy is continuing apace.³ For example, many were surprised when the AKP passed a law in 2004 lowering the compulsory retirement age for civil servants. This act swept out many older secularists and brought in young AKP party faithful, many graduates of Islamic schools. The ruling AKP is also increasingly putting pressure on the media. Freedom House expressed concerns about the AKP's intimidation of the media in the run-up to the elections.⁴

Erdogan has rejected charges that the AKP harbors a hidden agenda to undermine Turkish secularism and made a graceful and conciliatory acceptance speech. However, many secularists believe that the distance between AKP's moderates and its radicals is tactical: In the long run, they share similar strategic goals.

A Foreign Policy Challenge

Strong pillars supported the U.S.-Turkish bilateral relationship during the Cold War and throughout the 1990s, as the Soviet Union collapsed and Turkey sought its place in Eurasia. During the Cold War, Turkey's pro-Western secular elites championed unpopular causes: Turkey supported U.S. operations during the 1991 Gulf War and provided operational and intelligence support over the next ten years during Operation Northern Watch in Iraq's Kurdistan. Turkey also played vital roles in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Likewise, the U.S. supported Turkey by cracking down on the Kurdish terrorist organization PKK, culminating in the 1999 capture of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Successive U.S. administrations supported Turkey's European Union membership and opposed a slew of Armenian genocide resolutions in Congress. These relations produced goodwill and major projects, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Turkey's military cooperation with Israel thrived.

But recent domestic developments are affecting U.S.-Turkish relations and Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's new conservative religious elite is formulating a new foreign policy. This group, more suspicious of the West, has already signaled that Turkey is no longer a staunch U.S. ally. The AKP failed to deliver a crucial parliamentary vote authorizing the transit of the U.S. 4th Armored Division through Turkey to northern Iraq on the eve of the Iraq War. The AKP has also not explained to Turkish citizens why a strong U.S.-Turkish bilateral relationship is still important.

At the same time, AKP leaders and members, as well as many Turkish secular nationalists, have engaged in blatantly anti-American rhetoric. Members of the AKP claimed that U.S. troops are committing atrocities in Iraq. Specifically, in 2006, the AKP speaker of the parliament endorsed

the notorious film “Valley of the Wolves,” which libelously depicts the U.S. military and “greedy Jews” engaged in harvesting organs from prisoners and spraying crowds of civilians with machine gun fire. The effect of these diatribes, accompanied by a flurry of anti-American media publications, is that public approval of the U.S., once high, is now in the single digits—the lowest level of any country in the entire region.⁵ Anti-Israel feelings are rampant, and after terrorist attacks against two Istanbul synagogues, many Turkish Jews live in fear. With anti-American statements coming from the AKP’s highest levels and the mass media, anti-Americanism has become rampant in Turkey.

Anti-Americanism on the Rise

Anti-Americanism is not solely a function of U.S. policy toward Iraq. Turks are also angry about U.S. policy toward the PKK and northern Iraq, which they view as pro-Kurdish. The Turkish media have also insinuated that the Israeli intelligence services support the Kurdish separatists.

The PKK has resumed suicide bombings in large cities in Turkey, while quartering itself in havens in Iraqi Kurdistan. The United States has worked to shut down the PKK’s financial networks in Europe and appointed retired General Ralston as special envoy to cooperate with Turkey and counter the PKK. According to experts, the success of financial measures against the PKK has not been matched on the ground. The U.S. has failed to deliver tangible results—military action or arrests. Turkish officials claim that this status quo is severely harming the bilateral relationship.

While adeptly engaging the U.S. executive branch, the AKP also appears to be reorienting Turkey away from the West and towards the Muslim world. This includes labeling Israel as a “terrorist state” in 2004 and scaling down military cooperation with Jerusalem. In 2006 Turkey assigned its soldiers to the UN force in southern Lebanon as part of a predominantly Western peacekeeping force.⁶ Prime Minister Erdogan did so despite the opposition of radical Islamists and of the secular president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer.⁷

At the same time, there is a growing rapprochement with Syria, culminating in President Bashar al-Assad’s visit to Ankara in 2005 and Turkey’s “secret” mediator role, aimed at transferring the Golan Heights to Syria. Turkey also played host in Ankara to a high-ranking delegation of Hamas terrorists led by Khaled Mashal.

A major factor drawing Turkey closer to Syria and Iran is a shared interest in maintaining stability in the face of Kurdish separatism. Another factor in the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement is energy. Turkey has recently concluded a multi-billion dollar gas deal with Iran. Turkey’s relationship with Saudi Arabia has also strengthened of late. Relations with Egypt are growing apace, with ongoing dialogues on energy and security cooperation. However, it is the U.S. and Israel which will pay the price for this shift in Turkish foreign policy.

Crafting a New Policy for a New Turkey

Turkey always was and will remain a pivotal power in the region, especially as long as Iran and Iraq remain major challenges for U.S. foreign policy and as long as the regime in Teheran represents an existential threat to Israel. As Russia becomes a source of increasing concern, Turkey will also play a major role in keeping it in check, or will ally itself with the Russian bear.

It is in the strategic interests of both the United States and Israel to have Turkey pursuing democracy and economic growth and engaged in cooperative relationships with Washington and Jerusalem. The U.S. needs to make Ankara understand that it is an important partner but that it must play by the rules and respect U.S. national security interests in the region.

In order to improve U.S.-Turkish relations, the U.S. should place Turkey at the forefront of its regional diplomacy. Specifically, the U.S. needs to use every tool to address PKK terrorist attacks on Turkey from northern Iraq. The U.S. should also put more pressure on President Masoud Barazani of the Kurdish regional government in Erbil to crack down on PKK strongholds and deny PKK fighters a safe haven.

In addition, the U.S. should emphasize to the AKP leadership that it is in Turkey's long-term interests to keep facing the West. This includes cooperation in the war on terror, respect for the territorial integrity of Iraq, cooperation on sanctions against Iran, and maintaining good relations with Israel. Also important is the cessation of anti-American incitement and anti-Israel proclamations by government officials in the Turkish mass media.

The Bush Administration should expand cooperation with Turkey in the energy realm—especially on projects to boost oil and gas exports from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. Turkey can be an important partner in developing a Trans-Caspian natural gas Pipeline (TCP) and should be encouraged to build bridges to the new administration in Turkmenistan. At the same time, Washington should warn Ankara that excessive dependence on either Russian or Iranian gas will jeopardize Turkey's sovereignty and security in the long term.

Conclusion

If domestic politics and the AKP's anti-Americanism are any guide, Turkey's apparent shift toward the Middle East and the Muslim world could be more than a matter of passing expediency. Nevertheless, Washington and Jerusalem should do everything they can to put U.S.-Turkish and Turkish-Israeli relations back on track. The U.S. and Israel should reach out to pro-Western elements in the Turkish foreign and security elite and work with them to restore the U.S.-Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership.

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Notes

¹ Soner Cagaptay, "Upcoming Turkish Elections: Issues and Winners," *PolicyWatch*, No. 1257, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 6, 2007. See: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2633>.

² Soner Cagaptay, "Turkish Election Results: More or Less Stability?" The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 23, 2007, at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=358>. Accessed July 29, 2007.

³ I am indebted to Kemal Köprülü of Bilgi University (Istanbul) for this insight.

⁴ Freedom House, "Freedom House Calls on the Turkish Government to Respect Media Freedom Prior to Forthcoming Elections," February 27, 2007, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=467>.

⁵ "Pew Global Project Attitudes Survey," June 27, 2007, p. 13, at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/256.pdf>. Accessed July 30, 2007.

⁶ Gal Luft and Ariel Cohen, "Turkey: The Best Choice to Lead a Lebanon Force," *International Herald Tribune*, August 10, 2006, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/08/10/opinion/edluft.php>

⁷ Soner Cagaptay, "Turkey's Dangerous Lebanon Intentions," *Daily Star* (Lebanon), August 25, 2006. See: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=969>

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