

**PITFALLS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE US-TURKISH
ALLIANCE
A TPQ EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD PERLE**

By Nigar Göksel

Richard Perle is Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. Previously Richard Perle served as Chairman of the Defense Policy Board (2001-2003); Member of the Defense Policy Board (1987-2004); Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy (1981-87); and served on the US Senate Staff (1960-1980). He is a leading authority on national security, military requirements, arms proliferation, defense and regional conflicts. In our interview, Mr. Perle makes an assessment of the state of the US-Turkey relationship in which he has figured prominently over the years. Mr. Perle evaluates the recent decisions and public sentiments in Turkey as they relate to the future of the relationship with the United States. He also reflects upon various issues including Turkey's relationship with Israel and journey towards EU membership.

A TPQ Exclusive Interview with Richard Perle

TPQ: Could you describe how the US-Turkey relationship is different from the year 2000 - at the beginning of the first administration of George W. Bush?

Perle: I don't believe that the state of the relationship relates to the election of the Bush administration. The two large events have been the war in Iraq, and the AK party coming into power. Bush Administration policy toward Turkey did not differ from the previous administration. As a matter of fact, a number of the incoming officials of the Bush administration had always regarded themselves, and had been regarded as, good friends of Turkey. I'm thinking Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Cheney...

TPQ: And yourself...

Perle: And myself, although I was not officially in the administration. Doug Feith, also. There was a lot of, and still is a lot of, goodwill and respect for Turkey.

TPQ: Loosing the parliamentary vote to support the US in Iraq on March 1st, 2003 was a surprise. Both yourself and others had predicted that Turkey would go along. What is your analysis of what happened? What lessons can be learned?

Perle: If the Turkish government had the experience it does now, March 1st wouldn't have happened as it did, the resolution would have passed. I believe that the failure to get support for the vote had a lot to do with the inexperience of the government at the time. They supported the motion in assembly and they expected it to prevail. There were obviously some divisions but that is normal and I do believe that the government expected the vote to pass, and was surprised when it did not. This was, in my view, a matter of experience rather than intent.

TPQ: A number of individuals, including yourself, spent a lot of time and effort, as well as their personal capital investing in the US-Turkey relationship. Today, a significant percentage of the population in Turkey perceives the US as a threat to the country. Was the potential for this kind of a fallout seen? Could it have been prevented?

Perle: I don't think we had a choice. What was at stake in the view of the administration was the security of the country. After September 11, the president looked at the world with a very different perspective. And he said to himself, "if the next act of terror involved a weapon of mass destruction, what would the consequences be?" And then he looked at who had a history of weapons of mass destruction. And when you put those two things together, you produced a list on which Iraq was near the top of the list. So this was something that the United States believed was essential for its security. I believe the president would have gone ahead even if he had understood that it would be unpopular. And of course, if there had not been the threat of a French veto, the support of the United Nations would have been possible. In the end it didn't but that was a matter of one vote; hard to predict.

TPQ: People have said in the past that US-Turkey relations were too narrowly founded on defense and security matters, as a military-to-military relationship. Would you say that's the case today? If not, what changed?

Perle: There has been a good relationship between the United States and Turkish Armed Forces during the Cold War. That is true of our relation with all of our NATO allies, based on a common threat. We are part of an organization dedicated to dealing with that threat. So it was perfectly natural. I think the importance of the military relationship declined since the end of the Cold War. But the relations are much broader than that, and they have always been broader than that. The relationship includes an important economic dimension; the United States has been a consistent supporter of Turkey in the International Monetary Fund. NATO was obviously an important aspect of the relationship however it also included a political dimension. It has been a good relationship. I certainly understand that at the moment the United States is unpopular in Turkey and it is also unpopular in some other countries. This happens from time to time and we have got to deal with it.

TPQ: You mentioned a few issues on which the US has supported Turkey and in which Turkey has needed US support. Are there any issues for which the US needs Turkey, or in other words, does Turkey have any leverage over America today?

Perle: I don't think it's a hostile relationship so I don't think Turkey needs a leverage. When there were specific issues, we have never found it necessary to solve them by exerting leverage. We don't have any major differences with Turkey. We really don't. And I think a lot of what now appears to be a difficult moment in the relationship has to do with what is appearing in the press. There is disapproval in Turkey about what we are doing in Iraq. I think that will change eventually. When Iraq emerges into a decent democratic order, people will see that is a vast improvement over the days of Saddam Hussein.

TPQ: What about the Incirlik Base? Is the US' need for the Incirlik Base decreasing?

Perle: Yes, of course it is decreasing. Incirlik, for the US, has always been more than some runways. It has been, among other things, an expression of our close collaboration. I was involved in the negotiation back in the early 1980's and it was not simply a matter of a piece of real estate. We had other bases at the time. We were not dependent on Incirlik. Incirlik is a good base and we valued it, but it wasn't vital for our security even during the Cold War. There were many restrictions placed on our use of Incirlik, down to numbers of aircraft based there and the number of aircrafts that could be flown through Incirlik and so forth. But there was always a strong desire to keep that connection as an expression of the close working relationship between the US Air Force and the Turkish Armed Forces. I know it was often seen on the Turkish side as a source of leverage.

TPQ: On March 23rd you mentioned that the Bush Administration does not embrace the policy of supporting “the lesser of evils.” Do you believe that Turkey, prioritizing stability, opts for the “the lesser of evils” specifically, in the Middle East?

Perle: It is natural to fear instability. Most governments fear instability most of the time. And it is certainly true that President Bush believes that if stability in the short term comes at the price of dictatorship, than over the long term, it is in fact damaging. The terrorists that we are concerned about arise in circumstances as in Saudi Arabia and Egypt and elsewhere, where young people, often idealistic and impressionable, have no outlet because they live in repressive societies. That is where the terrorists have been coming from. So promoting democracy is part of the war against terror. I think this will even turn out to be true with respect to the PKK. The PKK is going to have a more difficult time recruiting people to join it when there is a democracy in Iraq.

TPQ: At the American Turkish Council conference in 2002 you suggested that instead of pursuing EU membership, Turkey should focus on working more closely with the United States. Do you still think so and in what specific ways do you think that the US would be a better partner to Turkey than the European Union?

Perle: Well, I think we are more open to all cultures. I think Europe is in fact much more inward looking. And it’s going to be quite a long time before Turkey achieves membership. I also think the heavy emphasis within Europe on the involvement of government in the daily lives of citizens and their economy is a less effective environment for economic growth and development. The prevailing attitudes in the US are more conducive to growth and development. There are deeply entrenched interests in Europe that are not terribly competitive and depend on government to protect them. And for a rising, young economy like Turkey’s, that’s not good. That being said, Turkey needs some serious reforms in the economic sense as well; the heavy involvement of the state in Turkey’s economy is not good for economic growth.

TPQ: Recently Turkey’s relationship with Israel seems to have cooled, certain problems have been experienced. What, in your view, is the cause for this trend? Do you think it could be related in any way to the Turkish government seeking a more ambitious role in the Arab world?

Perle: I don’t know. It seems to me unfortunate because there are only two democracies now in the region, Turkey and Israel. A third democracy, we hope, is on the way, namely Iraq. I believe Turkey and Israel have important common interests. This was certainly President Özal’s vision and it has been sustained by successive Turkish governments. There is important economic potential, some of which has already been realized, between Israel and Turkey. I think the tension in the relationship probably has something to do with the Israeli-Palestinian dispute due to sympathy in Turkey for the Palestinians. It is difficult to assess the Israeli-Palestinian issues when the principal source of news is the terrible images of the

fighting between Israel and Palestinians. But I think that has now subsided and I would hope that in this optimistic moment with respect to Israel and Palestinians, the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relationship would be **reversed**.

TPQ: The 90th anniversary of the “so-called Armenian genocide” is nearing. There is concern in Turkey that this year might be the year when the Congress recognizes the tragic events of the beginning of the 20th century as genocide. What is your opinion as to what the Congress will do?

Perle: I don't think it is likely that there will be any major action but in our Congress - we have 535 members of Congress – any one of them is able to put forward a resolution. So it is impossible for the Administration to prevent resolutions from being introduced. Now, we have always been able in the past to defeat them, and if it happens again, I believe it will be defeated again.

TPQ: The President's Inauguration speech covered the Greater Middle East Initiative extensively. As a friend of Turkey, you must have put a lot of thought into how Turkey fits into this initiative. How did you envision Turkey's role in this initiative then, and how do you see the prospects today?

Perle: Turkey could make a very substantial contribution because Turkey clearly has earned, by virtue of its democratic institutions, and its weight in the region, the right to demonstrate real leadership. I think Turkey could play a very important role by energetically supporting the kind of change that this initiative aims to bring about. It's good for Turkey; it's good for the region. I see no downside, I see only benefits.

TPQ: Would you go so far to say Turkey could play a role in mediation between the Arab countries and Israel or is that unrealistic?

Perle: I think the best way for Israel to resolve its dispute is with the Palestinians and not with the Arab world as a whole. The reason for that is that I believe that a number of countries in the Arab world have actually exploited the relationship between Israel and Palestinians for their own purposes. I don't assume goodwill on the part of the number of dictatorships. They're quite happy for there to be a bad relationship between Israel and Palestinians, partly because it helps them remain in power. So I think bringing the Arab world as such into this dispute will not help. What will help is a direct relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. There may be a role for Turkey in encouraging that. I have never understood why it is helpful to invite the dictators in Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran to resolve disputes between Israelis and Palestinians. The dictators always found it very useful for themselves. If you want a dictatorship, you have to find a way to mobilize the people, thus you develop enemies, internal and external. I don't think there has ever been a dictatorship that did not use the fears of foreign enemies and internal enemies to remain in power. This is the point which is argued very eloquently in a book by Natan Sharansky, called *The Case for Democracy*. It would be an important book anyway but it is a particularly important book because President Bush has read it

and asked his cabinet officers to read it, given copies of it to friends and associates. He has said that it reflects his views and thinking. I don't know whether there are plans to publish it in Turkish but it's a very good book.

TPQ: In my discussion with you, I do not get the feeling that you perceive a dramatic fallout between Turkey and the United States?

Perle: I don't think it is dramatic at all. There are some things that are troubling. For example, the apparent popularity of a book like *Mein Kampf*. I mean, that's really troubling. If I were a Turk, I would be embarrassed by it. It reminds me of *Das Kapital*. In the Soviet days, millions and millions of copies were printed; very few copies were actually read because it was such a boring, ponderous book. *Mein Kampf*, except for historians, is in a similar category. But it has certainly caused people to say "What is going on?" I gather it is being published by more than four, and according to some sources, more than nine publishing houses. It is very unusual that this many publishing houses simultaneously bring out a book written by Hitler in 1925, over three quarters of a century ago. I think some enterprising journalists should talk to the publishing houses and ask how and when and why they have focused on this book. I have written some books and I have dealt with publishers and the idea that these publishers are all sitting around and saying "Oh we can make some money off *Mein Kampf*, all about the same time, strikes me as highly questionable. The appeal of a book like *Mein Kampf* in a country that is definitely not Arian is really puzzling, because Hitler's vision was the enslavement of non-Arian world which would have enslaved Turkey. Turks are among the people who have suffered from ethnic prejudice. And to read a book, the essence of which is the demented ambitions of a racist dictator, is very puzzling. Jews have been victims of prejudice and so have the Turks. The history of the Jewish-Turkish relationship is a proud history for Turks.

TPQ: Do you believe, in retrospect, that America had too much confidence in the ability of the AKP?

Perle: I think the US government took the pragmatic view: "Let's wait and see what the government does." There were many people who feared that the AKP was another version of the Welfare Party and would attempt an extreme Islamist transformation. There were others who did not agree. We listened to what Tayyip Erdoğan was saying and he wasn't endorsing the radical agenda, neither were other leaders of the AKP. Therefore we decided to wait and see what would happen. So far I have not seen a basis for expecting the extreme policies that some people feared.

TPQ: You mentioned at a recent event that you did not observe a dramatic shift in Turkey's foreign policy. In terms of Cyprus, the government in fact did take dramatic steps, in a positive sense. Do you think that during Great Britain's presidency of the EU, the US will become more active with regard to the Cyprus problem?

Perle: I think what was done on Cyprus was very positive and it deserved a much stronger positive response, especially from the European Union. Admitting Cyprus as a member, Greece being a member, I think they had a real obligation to recognize and reward what the Turkish Cypriots have done (OR reassure Turkish Cypriots are not ignored). But they didn't and I think that's disappointing. I think we as the US should have done more too. As for whether the US is waiting for the UK presidency, I do not have such a sense. However I do not know because I am not currently in government. It is sometimes easier to do things depending on who has the presidency and what their objective is. When you serve as president for six months, your own agenda can sometimes crowd out other worthwhile projects. But I would think that if the British presidency were prepared to take an initiative, the US would certainly be strongly supportive

TPQ: It is frequently repeated that Turkey and the US still have many common interests. Could you offer some concrete ideas as to which interests Turkey and the US share and what the agenda of the relationship is? Also, what would your suggestions be for the two countries to be cautious about regarding their relationship?

Perle: Well, the list is long. The first item on it has, in my lifetime, been the natural solidarity of two democratic and secularist allies. I know that sounds insubstantial, it sounds even romantic, but in fact if you look at the American relationships, you'll find that our closest relationships are all with like-minded political cultures, with democracies, such as the UK, Canada and Australia. Australia is two-thirds of the way around the world, yet we have a very close relationship. Whereas, 90 miles away, there is Cuba, which we have a hostile relationship with. There is a sense of solidarity among democracies, among countries in which people choose their governments and the rule of law prevails. It always makes Americans uncomfortable when for reasons of real-politik, we end up having close relations with dictatorships. During the Cold War, certain lessons were learned. And since then conditions have changed. We can express our sentiments more profoundly. We have an obvious interest in protecting the integrity of the newly independent states of the Caucasus. No one wants to see another imperial drive by the successor to the Soviet Union and those states often feel quite vulnerable. As President Özal understood, a close relationship with Turkey would be very helpful for these nations. Such a relationship should not be anti-Russian, but based on positive values and mutual interests. We have huge interest in the continuing demonstration that a country that is predominantly Muslim can be a democratic and secular state and can enjoy good relations with the US. The idea of Turkey as a model and example is an important theme in American policy. We have good trading relationships. American companies invest in Turkey, we import from Turkey. I think there're going to be some difficulties because the textile situation changes. We will have to work on that.

On most issues, we have seen things pretty much the same way. Turkey was with us in some notable and very difficult situations, throughout the Cold War and during

the first Gulf War. We have always **wound up** on the same side, going in the same direction.

In my experience Americans who have been to Turkey come away with real affection to Turks. They like the Turks. This doesn't usually enter the textbooks about politics but it's certainly a factor. When I was in the Pentagon, I tried to bring as many people to Turkey as I could. It always had a positive effect.