

UNITED STATES AND TURKEY IN 2004: TIME TO LOOK NORTH

While Turkey prepares for a make or break year with the European Union (EU), perhaps a not less important issue for Ankara is its relationship with Washington. Over the past year, US-Turkish relationship has undergone some serious challenges. Despite the positive developments of the past months, today Ankara and Washington still do not appear to be on the same page when it comes to Iraq or their vision of the Middle East. Then, it seems that if the U.S.-Turkish relationship is to be reinvigorated in 2004, this would likely take place elsewhere, including Turkey's northern neighborhood (from the Balkans and Black Sea basin, to the Caucasus and Central Asia). There are many tangible opportunities for cooperation in this region. For instance, Washington and Ankara can work to bolster the energy corridor, carrying gas and oil out of the Caucasus and Central Asia, while helping facilitate democratic transitions in this area. Besides, they can collaborate to preserve the native brand of peaceful Islam in this region against the violent strains of wahhabism and Iranian propaganda. Finally, there is a golden opportunity for Turkey in 2004 for Ankara's own interests, as well as the U.S.-Turkish partnership: NATO's 2004 Istanbul summit. Turkey can launch a process of bringing countries around the Black, Caspian, and even the Mediterranean Seas into NATO's fold, as committed partners. A new NATO headquarters, "NATO-Istanbul," could be established in Istanbul to promote NATO security and guide NATO expansion in this area.

In sum, the immediate prospects of US-Turkish partnership lie in Turkey's north as well as in Turkey's ability to engage its potential in this region while facilitating NATO enlargement into its neighborhood. Herein lie the promises of 2004 for Turkey, for the U.S. and the EU.

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While Turkey gets ready for a fateful 2004 with the European Union (EU), it seems that a good part of the country's energy in this year will be consumed by the prospects of EU membership. Yet, perhaps a not less important issue for Ankara is to mend the fences with Washington after an eventful 2003. Throughout the past year, relations between the United States and Turkey were characterized by much wrangling over Iraq. After refusing to support the Iraq war in March, the Turkish parliament voted in October to send as many as 10,000 peacekeepers to help the U.S. efforts there. This deployment, however, never materialized due to fierce Iraqi (especially Kurdish) opposition to the idea of Turkish involvement there. Accordingly, Ankara is now on the sideline vis-à-vis Iraq, arguably Washington's chief foreign policy concern. If Turkey and the United States are not working together on this issue that bears so much weight for Washington, then is the U.S.-Turkish partnership, once staunch, now on the backburner? Not necessarily. If Washington and Ankara cannot fully cooperate in Iraq—or, for that matter, in the wider Middle East—they can hope to develop new partnerships elsewhere, especially around the Black and Caspian Sea basins, then perhaps even bringing stability to the EU's unstable eastern marches. For Turkey, it is time to look north: this is where the future of U.S.-Turkish relations lies.

Cooperation in Iraq?

When Ankara offered its support to Washington in October, it seemed possible that the two countries could collaborate in Iraq. This is no longer the case, however.

Washington's immediate priorities in Iraq do not involve Turkey: Regarding Iraq, the Bush administration now has only two main constituencies to appease: the American people, who need to be convinced ahead of the November 2004 elections that the Iraq operation is a success; and the Iraqi people, whose satisfaction with the United States is the best way of making sure that this operation does in fact succeed. In this regard, establishing security and transferring power to the locals as soon as possible—two steps with great appeal to the Iraqis—are Washington's immediate policy objectives in 2004. If Iraq is stable by fall, then this issue will not affect the Republican Party negatively at the polls. On the other hand, if the United States is still in charge of Iraq, with increasing attacks on U.S. forces around the time of the elections, then the American public—whose patience for nation-building tasks runs thin—will likely have an unfavorable view of the administration's Iraq policy. Subsequently, the Republicans could suffer heavily at the polls, especially if their Iraq conundrum is coupled by a lack of economic and job recovery at home.

Because the Iraq issue has become a matter of major domestic importance for the current administration, making Turkey a major partner in Iraq will not be among Washington's primary concerns (unless, of course, the security situation there deteriorates so much that the United States needs Turkey to establish order in Iraq, an unlikely but not totally improbable scenario).

Turkey a Model Country for the Middle East?

If not in Iraq, can the United States and Turkey cooperate perhaps in the wider Middle East? Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the question in Washington has been how to deal with the wrath of political Islam against America. With this in mind, the United States has viewed Turkey as a country whose experience might provide a blueprint with which to defuse the anger of the West-hating Middle East. As a predominantly Muslim, yet secular country enjoying the prospects of joining the EU, Turkey is seen as an alternative to Middle Eastern societies enveloped by authoritarian regimes, anti-Western hysteria, and religious fanaticism. According to this view, if the rest of the region followed the Turkish example, more societies could come into being where democracy and Islam successfully coexist.

Some skeptics would counter this view. Indeed, there are some obvious reasons why Turkey is not such a great candidate to be a model for the Middle East. For one thing, most opinion-makers and elites in that region view Turkey not as an example to follow, but rather as a travesty gone astray.

From a historical point of view, Turkey's unique political qualities are the product of a long and arduous historical process, not fully repeated elsewhere in the Middle East. Turkey has already undergone more than two centuries of Westernization, eighty years of secularism, as well as six decades of free and fair elections and multi-party democracy. Although they may have been quite similar prior to the early nineteenth century, Turkey and the rest of the Middle East have subsequently evolved in different directions. The wider Middle East has not gone through the Turkish experience, and there are no shortcuts for it to get to where Turkey is. Turkey can, however, provide inspiration to the region. The country serves as proof that a Muslim society can become prosperous, stable, and democratic if it takes these ideals seriously and invests decades of hard work toward them.

What makes the idea of the "Turkish model" even less feasible is the fact that Ankara may not be ready to play such a role. Last year's events vis-à-vis the Iraq war indicate that Turkey does not quite have the necessary intellectual capital or political will to act as a catalyst for change in the Middle East.

True, at least some people in Washington like to think that the current Turkish government, led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP)— a party that, despite its Islamist pedigree, likes to describe itself as a Muslim democratic movement—testifies to the fact that Islam and democracy are compatible.

Yet, others find it difficult to agree with this conclusion. AKP's coming to power is neither a sign that democracy and Islam are compatible nor proof that Turkey is a true democracy. Turkey had already proven itself as a democracy, if an illiberal one at times, since switching over to a multi-party system in 1946. As a predominantly Muslim country, Turkey does not need to have an Islamist (or formerly Islamist) party take power in order to prove that it is a democracy. Rather, what it needs to prove this assertion is to have a democratic environment in which political parties come to power through free and

fair elections. Turkey has had such an environment for almost sixty years. In this regard, there is nothing cataclysmic about the AKP experience, nor is the party's coming to power a watershed event for the Muslim world.

Since America's current vision of the Middle East focuses so much on Iraq and on political change in the Middle East, and since Turkey does not seem to have the capacity to participate in these undertakings, Ankara is not currently among Washington's primary partners in the Middle East. Can Turkey position itself as a desired associate for Washington elsewhere?

The Northern Arch of Cooperation

If Turkey cannot work with Washington closely in the Middle East, it can do so in its northern neighborhood, a large swath of territory running from the Balkans in the west, through the Black Sea basin in the center, to the Caucasus and Central Asia in the east.

In this regard, Ankara can offer the following valuable assets to Washington. If followed thoroughly, such policies could make Turkey stabilizing influence in an area that is important for both the EU and the U.S. Then, Turkey could position itself as a vital asset for the EU. Ankara could also remake itself as an important ally for the United States in a large part of Eurasia, offsetting the effect of what the U.S.-Turkish partnership may be missing in the Middle East.

1. Preserve local Islam:

While Turkey cannot quite act as a model country for the Middle East, it can fulfill this role much more effectively in its northern neighborhood: in the Balkans (in Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania, Serbia-Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bulgaria, all of which have either Muslim pluralities or large Muslim minorities), European Russia (with almost 20 million Muslims), as well as the Caucasus and Central Asia (with five predominantly Muslim countries: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizistan, Tajikistan; and two states with large Muslim communities: Georgia and Kazakhstan). Specifically, Turkey can help sustain the version of Islam that it shares with this region. The most definitive marker of this form of Islam, commonly called Turkish/Balkan/Border Islam, is its ability to peacefully coexist with the West.

Today, however, this form of Islam is under attack in Turkey's northern neighborhood on two fronts. First is the homogenizing influence of puritan wahhabism. Following the collapse of communism, wahhabism penetrated this region, using its potent financial, institutional, and religious arms, in an effort to homogenize Islamic practice there to render it similar to what is practiced in Saudi Arabia. Second is Iran, which is planting the seeds of anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism in the area, especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

This is where Ankara can come in, providing a counter-weight to both of these influences. In this regard, Turkey need not promote any model of Islam, but rather should help preserve what already exists in the region. Whether by buttressing secular education (with Washington supplying funds for it and Ankara offering implementation

mechanisms, such as curriculum sharing and teacher training workshops), or by establishing religious centers and cultural/academic exchanges, the United States and Turkey can cooperate in many ways against wahhabism and Iranian-backed radicalism.

A U.S.-Turkish enterprise would likely be received positively in the region, where both Washington and Ankara are regarded as friends. Despite the global surge in anti-Americanism, formerly communist countries (including those in Turkey's northern neighborhood, an area that U.S. power helped liberate) have a more positive view of Washington than does much of the rest of the world. Turkey also receives a sympathetic ear in the region due to various cultural affinities. In addition to sharing the region's Turkish/Balkan/Border Islam, Turkey can claim the following commonalities:

- Significant historic and social links with the Balkans. (The Ottoman Empire ruled the area for over half a millennium, leaving behind a deep residue of Islam as well as Turkish culture and ethnicity.)
- Revered ethnic and historic ties with Muslims in Russia and the Caucasus. (The Ottoman Empire governed the northern Black Sea basin for centuries, creating a deep bond between it and Turkey. Moreover, the area is the historical greenhouse of Turkish nationalism, which grew there before emerging in Turkey.)
- Vital linguistic and ethnic affinities with Central Asia. (A speaker of Turkish would need only a few weeks of training before being able to converse in Uzbek, Turkmen, and other Turkic languages of the area, which are akin to Turkish).

Such links are important: because of them, Turkey is more popular in its northern neighborhood than anywhere else in the world.

2. *Provide a geo-strategic balance against Russia and Iran:*

Washington may need Ankara most in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The alternatives to Turkish partnership are Iran and Russia, both of which are undesirable candidates: Moscow and Tehran's ideological, strategic, and energy interests in the region often clash with those of Washington. Hence, if Ankara can come forth as a genuine partner, acting as counterweight against Russia and Iran, then Turkey can become America's primary strategic ally in the area. Ankara could further enhance its position by magnifying its role in the region's energy corridor, an artery projected to carry oil and gas from the Caucasus and Central Asia to the Western world.

3. *Catalyze NATO enlargement into the Black, Caspian Sea and Mediterranean Sea basins: NATO headquarters in Istanbul*

Turkey could also deepen its relationship with the United States by helping to bring the Black, Caspian, and perhaps even the Mediterranean Sea nations into NATO's fold. In this regard, Ankara has a golden and immediate opportunity: NATO's 2004 "expansion" summit in Istanbul, at which seven countries from Eastern Europe will join NATO. By spinning off a creative vision for NATO/Western enlargement toward the Black, Caspian, and Mediterranean Sea basins, Ankara could turn this summit into a showcase for itself.

This would require creative thinking on Turkey's behalf. In this regard, a good step would be suggesting Istanbul as the site of a new NATO headquarters. While Brussels would continue to be the NATO headquarters, serving the Transatlantic aspect of NATO's security agenda, a new NATO headquarters, "NATO-Istanbul," would be established in Istanbul to promote NATO security and guide NATO expansion in Turkey's northern, eastern and southern neighborhoods. There would be three likely roles for this NATO headquarters:

- First, it would be the nexus for cooperation between NATO and the Partnership for Peace countries of Eurasia. (After this year's NATO expansion, fifteen countries in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia will fall into this category). Istanbul would be the nerve center for the evolving pact between these countries and NATO. Istanbul's geographical location on the Bosphorous, as well as the city's positioning as the economic center of these regions would make it an ideal candidate for such a role.
- Second, Istanbul could also serve as a center to deepen NATO's ongoing security dialogue with the Mediterranean countries, the so-called "Mediterranean Dialogue," involving Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, perhaps elevating this enterprise to Partnership for Peace level and tying these countries in a security arrangement with each other, with Turkey and NATO.
- Finally, as a second NATO headquarters, Istanbul could also pave the way for extending NATO's security umbrella towards the rest of the Middle East, perhaps providing a framework for bringing Iraq into the fold of a greater NATO.

NATO is a Cold War success story, one that can bring stability to the volatile region around Turkey. U.S.-Turkish cooperation in this regard would put Ankara back on the map in Washington's eyes, reminding the administration of Turkey's importance while making Istanbul a NATO hub.

4. *Act as a democratic partner in possible political transitions in the region:*

The brisk fall of Edward Shevardnadze's octogenarian and weary regime in Georgia may be the first sign of upcoming political changes in the Caucasus/Central Asia region. After having ruled with an iron fist for over a decade while, failing to provide freedoms or prosperity to their people, the authoritarian regimes of the region are fatigued. Should any of them follow Shevardnadze's path and collapse, one of two scenarios could result:

- Breakdown a la Yugoslavia with integral nationalist or other fundamentalist regimes taking over, creating an ethnic and political maelstrom, followed by isolation from the West.
- Transition a la Bulgaria, with the short-term creation of pluralist structures that could absorb ethnic and political tensions, as well as gradual, if cumbersome,

creation of a free market economy, accompanied by a strengthening of ties with the West

If authoritarian regimes in the region do in fact fall, Turkey could play the same role it had played in Georgia over the past several, that is, foster the Bulgarian scenario. Ankara and Washington could work together to facilitate transition from authoritarian regimes to democracies, preventing political fragmentation and anarchy. Such cooperation would help avoid instability in a region vital to the United States, in addition to ensuring that the energy corridor is secure. It would also prevent ethno-political fragmentation, a scenario which would lead to a power vacuum that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other countries would be more than eager to fill.

The Promise of 2004

It has long been said that Turkey suffers from its location in a “bad neighborhood.” During the Cold War, the country faced the challenge of being flanked outright by the Soviet Union. During the 1990s, Turkey suffered economically and politically from the fact that it was surrounded by authoritarian regimes in the Caucasus and dictatorships in the Middle East. Now, for the first time in decades, there is hope that this situation may change. If the promising developments in Georgia bear fruit, and if all goes well in Iraq, Turkey may have two “evolving” democracies as neighbors by the end of 2004. This would be great news: for the first time in modern history, a majority of Turkey’s neighbors would be democracies. In this regard, Turkey has every interest in hoping that Iraq is a success case in working with the United State to ensure that Georgia remains stable. What better vision for Turkey than a neighborhood in which it is flanked by states that share some of its best qualities? As Turkey prepares for a decisive year with the EU, herein lies the promises of 2004 for Ankara, for US-Turkish partnership, as well as for the EU. Working with the U.S., Turkey can help stabilize Europe’s eastern marches, demonstrating to Brussels that Turkish membership into the Union is as much about assets as it is about liabilities.