



DISPATCHES

A Problematic Partnership

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ISTANBUL, TURKEY—During the decades of the Cold War, relations between the United States and Turkey were close and robust, underpinned by shared interests and reinforced by mutual participation in NATO. Today, however, things are quite different; while Turkey and the United States are still allies, diverging interests on a number of fronts have made ties between Ankara and Washington increasingly difficult.

In today's Turkey, America is still seen as a major friend and ally. Strategic cooperation with the U.S. remains a top foreign policy priority, notwithstanding Ankara's efforts to join the European Union (EU) and establish closer ties with Russia and the Arab and Islamic worlds. The two countries likewise maintain cooperation on a range of defense and security matters, and Turkey is appreciative of Washington's backing in its bid for EU membership and such regional projects as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan energy pipeline. To a large extent, Ankara has even pinned its hopes for a settlement of the Cyprus issue on American diplomacy.

Increasingly, however, new regional priorities are creating strains in the once-robust U.S.-Turkish partnership.

Iraq is unquestionably the main "irritant." Back in early 2003, taking its cues from public opinion, the Turkish government—as well as the Turkish military—rejected U.S. requests for active support in the invasion of Iraq. The Turkish parliament's subsequent rejection of a bill that would have allowed the U.S. to use its territory for a "northern front" against Saddam Hussein's regime deeply angered the Bush administration, creating a lasting chill in the bilateral relationship.



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And, although the two countries are now working together to build a stable and democratic Iraq, the negative effects have lingered. Several incidents, such as the detention and hooding of several Turkish intelligence officers in northern Iraq by the U.S. forces in 2003, have added to growing hostility on the Turkish “street.” The results are unmistakable; anti-Americanism in Turkey, reflected in both popular sentiment and the mass media, has reached heretofore-unseen proportions.

Another divisive issue is the looming question of the Kurds. Iraq’s Kurdish minority has already succeeded in establishing an autonomous administration in the country’s north, bordering Turkey. Recent statements by Kurdish leaders further suggest that their ultimate ambition is to achieve full independence. Such a possibility frightens the Turks because of the spillover effect it could have on the ethnic Kurdish population in southeastern Turkey—to the point that government officials (and the country’s military) consider it a potential *casus belli*. Worse still, the perception in Turkey is that the United States has allowed Iraq’s Kurds to maintain these aspirations, and at times has even empowered them. Some in Turkey harbor suspicions that the U.S. would be willing to countenance the creation of an independent Kurdish state in the Middle East.

Most damaging of all, however, is the perception in Turkey that America has not done enough against the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). For nearly three decades, that radical group has attempted to destabilize Turkey through a range of terrorist activities, claiming more than 30,000 lives to date. Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime, PKK insurgents have established camps and hideouts in northern Iraq, using it as a base for hit-and-run attacks across the Iraqi–Turkish border. Turkey has repeatedly appealed the U.S. to destroy these bases and capture the rebels, but to little avail. There is deep disappointment in many corners with this state of affairs. Moreover, in the absence of American action, some nationalist observers have suggested that the Turkish army should take matters into its own hands and enter Iraq—a course of action that could profoundly destabilize Turkish–American ties.

Another irritant is the new assertiveness that is now becoming visible in Turkish foreign policy. Increasingly, Ankara has refused to follow Washington’s line, particularly when it comes to Syria and Iran. This is not because Turkey does not share some American concerns toward these countries. It does. But of late, normalization with both Damascus and Tehran has become viewed as being in Turkey’s best interests (making possible a common front against the PKK and Kurdish separatism in Iraq, expanding bilateral trade and economic cooperation, et cetera). What’s more, Ankara has persisted with these contacts despite U.S. concerns in part because, at least officially, it believes that this policy—which positions Turkey as a facilitator—benefits the U.S. and the West.

This kind of an assertive policy may not always correspond with Washington’s wishes. But these are the new realities animating Ankara’s attitudes toward the United States. And they are likely to continue to make U.S.–Turkish relations a problematic partnership.

