

PolicyWatch #1322 : Special Forum Report

## A Middle East Study Tour: Perspectives from Turkey

Featuring [Soner Cagaptay](#)

December 19, 2007

*Upon returning from the latest Washington Institute Study Tour to the Middle East, senior fellow Soner Cagaptay discussed his findings and impressions at a special Institute Policy Forum. The following is his own summary of his remarks at the forum. Senior fellow David Makovsky addressed the forum as well, discussing his impressions from Amman, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv; a summary of his remarks was published as [PolicyWatch no. 1323](#).*

A group of Institute trustees and fellows recently visited Turkey, meeting with policymakers, scholars, journalists, and community leaders. A key finding of the delegation was that Turkish foreign policy seems to be settling into a new pattern -- one friendly to the United States, Syria, and Iran.

### **Booming Economy and the PKK**

The two main topics in Turkey today are the booming economy and worries about the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The political stability provided by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in 2002, has resulted in a notably strong economic growth. As a result, Turkey now benefits from an improved European-style infrastructure, a dynamic private sector, and a vibrant middle class. The country's major businesses, most of which are secular, have benefited significantly from the economic growth and are generally supportive of the AKP, although some seem to disagree with the party's social and cultural agenda.

The PKK, on the other hand, trumps all other issues in Turkey. Although Turkey witnessed significant political tensions earlier this year over the issue of secularism and religion in politics, such tensions seem suppressed now in light of the recent PKK attacks. In fact, it can be said that the terror issue and the debate over secularism are on opposite cycles: when the PKK issue peaks, the debate over secularism dips, and vice versa. It should be noted, however, that while the debate over secularism is on the back burner now, it is very much alive.

### **Three-Dimensional Foreign Policy: The United States, Iran, and Syria**

A two dimensional picture of Turkish foreign policy shows either strong ties between Turkey and the United States and Israel, or strong ties between Turkey and Syria and Iran. A three dimensional perspective, however, shows the many layers of Turkish foreign policy simultaneously; the ongoing transformation of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East since 2002 seems to have now settled on a new plateau.

There is a gap between reality and perception in Turkey. Turkey and the United States have an ongoing, strong cooperation on a wide array of issues such as Afghanistan and Iraq. However, the public is not aware of such cooperation or why it is in Turkey's interests. This is where the AKP government could help by using the right rhetoric to bridge the gap between reality and perception, explaining to the Turks why it is in Turkey's interests to collaborate with the United States.

It should be noted that during its meetings, the delegation saw challenges to the close cooperation between the

United States and Turkey. House Resolution 106, also known as the Armenian Genocide Resolution (AGR), seems to have added to the resentment against the United States. In fact, the issue was raised in every delegation meeting with Turkish counterparts. More generally, popular approval of the United States is at its all-time low and anti-Americanism is laying deep roots throughout Turkey.

The Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership remains strong. However, despite its history as a country with no potent traditions of anti-Semitism, Turkey is now witnessing emerging tensions.

While Turkey has good cooperation with the United States and good ties with Israel, it also has good ties to Iran and a powerful cooperation with Syria. Since 2002, Iran and Syria have been actively cooperating with Turkey against the PKK, which is the main reason why the Turkish public has warmed up to these two countries. Iran has taken advantage of U.S. inactivity in northern Iraq to such a degree that when an American official shows support for Turkey's concerns and promises future action against the PKK, Iran actually bombs PKK camps in northern Iraq, boosting the popularity of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad.

Attitudes toward Syria in Ankara are also quite positive. There is a wide consensus among Turkish policymakers that Syria is a reasonable country that should be brought into the international sphere with Turkey's help. Regarding Iran, there seems to be an emerging consensus in Ankara that while some aspects of Iran's policy -- specifically its nuclear policy -- are problematic, Turkish-Iranian relations have to be nurtured and maintained. Two issues that cause the most divergence among policymakers in Ankara are Hamas and Hizballah. Opposition parties and secular Turks criticize the AKP's continuing contacts with Hamas, and call both Hamas and Hizballah "terrorist groups period."

### **PKK: Challenge and Opportunity for Washington**

The main challenge to the U.S.-Turkish relationship is the PKK issue; however, the PKK also provides the U.S. government with a great opportunity. U.S. assistance to Turkey to combat the PKK in northern Iraq will move public opinion favorably toward the United States, while preventing Turkey's slide towards Iran and Syria. The current military and intelligence cooperation between the two countries helps, but it has come in the winter months when the PKK goes into hibernation in the high mountains of northern Iraq. Unless the cooperation continues into the spring when the PKK typically resumes a higher level of activity, the cooperation will not have its full potential impact in reversing anti-Americanism in Turkey. Only persistent and consistent U.S. assistance to Turkey against the PKK, into the next year and beyond, will help reverse the tide of anti-Americanism in the country. In this regard, recent U.S.-Turkish cooperation against the PKK, with the U.S. providing real-time satellite intelligence to Turkey on the PKK presence in northern Iraq, has been a welcome development and was noted in all meetings of the delegation.

Meanwhile, however, the United States government should exercise caution in defining its policies towards the current measures implemented by the AKP government. The AKP seems to be on the brink of opening up political avenues to deal with the PKK, including a possible amnesty for PKK members. However, there is a high chance that through the course of the political process, the PKK may resort to violence, as terrorist groups often do when they feel their demands are not being met through negotiations. If the U.S. government were to be seen as supportive of the political process, it would suffer significantly from the failure of such process or from intermittent PKK violence. That is why Washington should exercise caution and allow the Turks to deal with the PKK inside Turkey, while continuing to provide military and intelligence assistance for its struggle against the PKK in Iraq.

*Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program](#) at The Washington Institute.*

Copyright 2008 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy