

PolicyWatch #1609

## Mr. Erdogan Visits Washington: The AKP's Foreign Policy and United States Interests

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December 3, 2009

*This PolicyWatch revisits some key points in the author's 2007 Washington Institute Policy Focus, [Secularism and Foreign Policy in Turkey: New Elections, Troubling Trends](#). For more on this topic, please visit our [Turkish Research Program](#) page.*

On December 7, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will visit Washington to meet with President Barack Obama. The meeting follows Obama's April visit to Turkey, during which the U.S. leader reached out to Ankara in an effort to realign the countries' interests after the tumultuous years of the Bush administration. Despite Obama's efforts, Turkish foreign policy seems to be drifting farther away from the United States, especially on issues such as Iran and Sudan. To what extent can Washington use the upcoming visit to continue seeking alignment between U.S. and Turkish foreign policy objectives?

### Rise of Anti-Western Nationalism in Turkey

Since coming to power in 2002, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has made significant changes in Turkish foreign policy. For decades beforehand, Ankara's foreign policy paradigm had centered on the promotion of national interests vested in the West. This orientation was set in 1946, when Turkey chose to ally itself with the Western powers in the Cold War. Since then, successive Turkish governments have pursued close cooperation with the United States and Europe. All along, Turkey viewed the Middle East and global politics through the lens of its own national security interests.

Lately, however, Turkish public support for and identification with the country's traditional Western allies (the United States, Europe, and Israel) have diminished. In the place of these allies, Ankara has established warm ties with Iran, Sudan, and Russia, and defended Hamas on the world stage. Turkish public attitudes toward the West, in turn, have cooled. Prior to 2002, the United States consistently ranked high among countries favored by the Turks. Few other nations elicited comparable sympathy, with examples being Turkish Cyprus and Azerbaijan. The latter of these typically received about a 60 percent favorability ranking. Against this background, in 1999, an impressive 52 percent of Turks -- virtually unanimous in the Turkish context -- expressed positive views about the United States. By 2009, even in the aftermath of President Obama's visit, according to the latest Pew poll, a mere 14 percent gave the same response.

This downward trend appears to be related to a recent phenomenon in Turkey that encompasses a rise of anti-Western nationalism imbued with Islamism. The outside world first got wind of this movement through cultural products such as the vehemently anti-American, anti-Semitic film *Valley of the Wolves*, as well as political incidents, including the murder of a Catholic priest in Trabzon, on the Black Sea coast, in February 2006.

Previously, Turkish leaders successfully made the case to the public that the country's interests lay with its Western allies, to the point that popular attitudes were swayed in the direction of supporting the United States.

One example of such persuasion by officials involved former Turkish prime minister and president Turgut Ozal, who made an initially unpopular yet ultimately powerful argument in favor of Turkish support for the United States in the 1991 Gulf War. As a result, the Turkish public backed the U.S. effort. Such a tendency, however, has not continued under the AKP, which has often taken an anti-Western stance before the Turkish public. This is, in part, because the party does not seem to consider Turkey part of the West. When Prime Minister Erdogan, who is also the AKP leader, addressed the summit of the Arab League in Khartoum, Sudan, in 2006, he told the attending heads of state that the "developed nations use terror to sell us weapons."

Through the AKP's efforts to align with nations such as Iran and Sudan, rather than with its former Western allies, the Turks are helping nourish domestic sympathy for such regimes. This transition by AKP officials -- in both policy and rhetoric -- gives significant impetus to the growing feeling among Turks that their interests lie with a foreign policy that is both anti-Western and increasingly Islamist.

### **'Strategic Depth,' or Turning Turks toward Anti-Western Countries**

By implementing a new, sophisticated foreign policy theory called "strategic depth," the AKP has taken another step to promote the rise of anti-Western nationalism in Turkey. The theory on its face is benign, with the premise being that Turkey sits amid a number of "geocultural basins," such as the Middle East and the "Muslim world" (which are identical, according to the theory) and the West (Europe and the United States). Turkey can only emerge as a regional power, the thinking goes, if it establishes good ties in each of these basins and, hence, with all its neighbors.

The implications of such a policy are problematic, and in the Turkish context the new order has a counterrevolutionary strain. First, instead of considering Turkey's membership in the West a given, it suggests that the country should deal equally with the West and the "Muslim world." Turkey is thus severed from its traditional pro-Western orientation, which, according to the strategic depth concept, is considered a form of alienation. The ramifications of all this cannot be overstated: the drift away from the West is the most important paradigm change in Turkish foreign policy since the beginning of the Cold War.

A second problem with the strategic depth theory is that, in the process of improving ties with its neighbors, Turkey will necessarily have to eschew its traditionally close relations with Israel, which the theory likewise brands as a case of alienation. The beneficiaries of such distancing have included Syria and Russia, along with Iran, each of which has enjoyed warmer relations with the Turkish leadership. Alongside weakened ties with Israel, the Turkish relationship with Georgia and Azerbaijan has also suffered. In pushing its theory, the government has tried to brush aside past friction with neighboring states. The theory has suggested, for example, that any previous tensions between Turkey and Syria -- such as anger expressed by Turks as a result of Damascus giving refuge to Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) members who committed terror attacks -- were artificial.

### **Drivers of the AKP's Foreign Policy**

Domestic aspirations seem to be melding the AKP's foreign policy with its anti-Western pedigree, rooted in its Islamist past. In 1997, the AKP's predecessor, the Refah (Welfare) Party, was forced to step down from government when popular discontent was voiced thanks to Western backing. From this experience, the AKP has drawn the lesson that it must maintain strong popular support. To do so, the party seems to be relying on a populist tactic of enhancing its domestic standing through criticizing the West -- a tactic that seemingly has succeeded. In line with driving down Turkish attitudes toward the United States and the West, the AKP now stokes feelings of anti-Western nationalism in drawing broad support for its foreign policy.

### **Cost to the United States**

The result of the strategic depth theory will be a continued reshaping of Turkish foreign policy, with a slant toward countries and actors that show anti-Western and Islamist tendencies. Were the AKP's foreign policy

simply to reflect empathy for Muslims, that would be quite normal. But instead the move seems to be toward alignment with regimes that hold expressly Islamist and anti-Western worldviews. In this regard, we can draw a case study from AKP policies toward Hamas. In 2006, AKP leaders met in Ankara with Khaled Mashal, then leader of Hamas's military wing, despite criticism from the West. To this day, the AKP continues to defend the visit and oppose Western efforts to isolate Hamas. Meanwhile, the party dismisses Turkey's traditionally close ties with the secular government of the Palestinian Authority (PA), with diplomatic sources suggesting that PA president Mahmoud Abbas's last visit to Ankara, in July 2009, went terribly.

More broadly, in its identification with Islamist and anti-Western regimes in the Middle East, the AKP is not averse to supporting even those who commit crimes against their own people. For instance, the AKP has defended Sudanese leader Hassan al-Bashir despite the International Criminal Court's warrant calling for the leader's arrest for atrocities committed in Darfur. On November 8, Erdogan said, "I know that Sudanese leader al-Bashir is not committing genocide in Darfur, because al-Bashir is a Muslim and Muslims do not commit genocide."

### **Fixing the Problem**

Though the AKP has maintained cooperation with the United States in the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, the party's foreign policy appears corrosive for U.S. interests in the long term. As noted, the AKP encourages anti-Western rhetoric and views ever more in line with Islamism, thereby helping stir similar anti-Westernism among the populace. Meanwhile, anti-Americanism is fast becoming internalized within Turkish society.

The U.S. administration's reshuffle in foreign policy -- placing Turkey higher up on the agenda and jump-starting efforts to improve strained bilateral ties -- has not produced its intended effect of shifting Turkish public opinion back toward the United States and the West. Even if Washington continues to take the right steps regarding Turkey policy, only a pro-Western foreign policy in Ankara coupled with pro-Western rhetoric by the AKP will likely dispose Turks more favorably toward the United States.

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