

# WebMemo



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## After the Elections: Washington's Turkish Dilemma

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On July 22, Turkey's Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) scored an impressive victory in parliamentary elections, winning an unprecedented 47 percent of the vote—up from 34 percent in 2002. Turkey's secular system will continue to be challenged as the AKP gradually pulls Islamic values further into public life and challenges the military, the presidency, the court system, and the universities, all of which are still staunchly secular.

The AKP is not the steadfast U.S. ally that its predecessors often were and threatens to turn Turkey from the U.S. and the West and toward Islamic countries in its foreign policy. Turkey is critical to U.S. relations with the Muslim world, especially Iran and Iraq; it is a bridge to the Middle East, a successful democracy, and an important energy transit country. Washington must work harder to engage Turkey, ensuring that the country continues to look toward the West in its politics and policies.

**The Roots of Victory.** The U.S. State Department and the media have praised the Turkish elections as a vindication of democracy and a guarantee of another five years of a stable investment climate. It is true that the AKP leadership has done wonders for the Turkish economy. Foreign investment rose from \$9.6 billion in 2005 to \$19.8 billion in 2006; inflation has declined to 4 percent after years of double digit rates; and per-capita income has jumped from \$2,598 in 2002 to \$5,477 today. These metrics are routinely praised by bullish Wall Street and Turkish investors alike.

But the economic numbers tell only a part of the story. While the economy has surged, the AKP has masterfully exploited divisions between the secular and the religious sectors of Turkish society to expand its grip on power, with potentially dire implications for Turkey's foreign policy orientation.

The AKP's pre-election propaganda stated that Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul's nomination to the presidency (which triggered the early elections) was blocked because he is Muslim and that this "injustice" could be "undone" by voting for the AKP.<sup>1</sup> The message was effective: The 12 percent increase in AKP votes coincided with a 10 percent increase in the number of Turks who identify themselves as Muslim first and Turkish second.<sup>2</sup>

This divide is likely to exacerbate current tensions among political, religious, and ethnic political groups, especially the large Kurdish minority, and lead to greater instability. These brewing conflicts threaten Turkey's secular model, its attractiveness to foreign investment, and the current wave of domestic prosperity. The AKP victory raises questions about the increasing role of religion in this previously secular state and possible reactions from secular quarters, including Turkey's powerful military.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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**Islamic Transformation.** AKP critics state that the party is seeking to subvert Turkey's institutions. The bulwark of the secular system, the presidency, is a critical political office and has several significant powers, including a legislative veto and the power to make key state appointments.

The AKP landslide, coupled with the new and growing divide between Muslims and the secular, raises the specter of an AKP "secret agenda" that could haunt the country. Specifically, critics fear the creeping Islamization of Turkey, especially if an AKP president is put into office this coming fall.

The AKP has already attempted to criminalize alcohol and adultery, while allowing the formerly banned *turban* (an Islamic woman's headdress) into the public sphere. The AKP also tried to allow graduates of *imam khatibs* (Islamic religious schools) to be allowed into universities, something that Turkish law and the country's universities currently oppose.

The AKP's renewed mandate and a future AKP presidency may allow Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to push the envelope further. Despite the AKP's major win, it has not achieved the absolute majority in parliament necessary to nominate its president. The party emerged 27 votes short—with 340 seats out of 550 total—and will need the support of the opposition or independent members to elect the next head of state. If it can gain that support, it may score another significant victory.

The Turkish president nominates justices to the supreme court and approves appointments of general officers and university presidents. Undermining secularism by weakening the military, the court system, and academia could pave the way for further Islamization.

In the meantime, the appointment of Islamists to the lower rungs of the state and provincial bureaucracy is continuing apace.<sup>3</sup> For example, many were

surprised when the AKP passed a law in 2004 lowering the compulsory retirement age for civil servants. This act swept out many older secularists and brought in young AKP party faithful, many graduates of Islamic schools. The ruling AKP is also increasingly putting pressure on the media. Freedom House recently expressed concerns about the AKP's intimidation of the media in the run-up to the elections.<sup>4</sup>

Erdogan has rejected charges that the AKP harbors a hidden agenda to undermine Turkish secularism and made a graceful and reconciliatory acceptance speech. However, many secularists believe that the distance between the AKP's moderates and its radicals is tactical: In the long run, they share similar strategic goals.

**A Foreign Policy Headache for the U.S.** Strong pillars supported the U.S.–Turkish bilateral relationship during the Cold War and throughout the 1990s, as the Soviet Union collapsed and Turkey sought its place in Eurasia. During the Cold War, Turkey's pro-Western secular elites championed unpopular causes: Turkey supported U.S. operations during the 1991 Gulf War and provided operational and intelligence support over the next 10 years during Operation Northern Watch in Iraq's Kurdistan. Turkey also played vital roles in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Likewise, the U.S. supported Turkey by cracking down on the Kurdish terrorist organization PKK, culminating in the 1999 capture of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Successive U.S. administrations supported Turkey's European Union membership and opposed a slew of Armenian genocide resolutions in Congress. These relations produced goodwill and major projects, such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline.

But recent domestic developments are affecting U.S.–Turkish relations and Turkish foreign policy.

1. Soner Cagaptay, "Upcoming Turkish Elections: Issues and Winners," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy-Watch* No. 1257, July 6, 2007, at [www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2633](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2633).
2. Soner Cagaptay, "Turkish Election Results: More or Less Stability?" The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 23, 2007, at [www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=358](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=358).
3. I am indebted to Kemal Köprülü for this insight.
4. Freedom House, "Freedom House Calls on the Turkish Government to Respect Media Freedom Prior to Forthcoming Elections," February 27, 2007, at [www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=467](http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=467).

Turkey's new conservative religious elite is formulating a new foreign policy. This group, more suspicious of the West, has already signaled that Turkey is no longer a staunch U.S. ally. The AKP failed to deliver a crucial parliamentary vote authorizing the transit of the U.S. 4th Armored Division through Turkey to northern Iraq on the eve of the Iraq War. The AKP has also not explained to Turkish citizens why a strong U.S.–Turkish bilateral relationship is still important.

At the same time, AKP leaders and members, as well as many Turkish secular nationalists, have engaged in blatantly anti-American rhetoric. Members of the AKP claimed that U.S. troops are committing atrocities in Iraq. Specifically, in 2006, the AKP speaker of the parliament endorsed the notorious film “Valley of the Wolves,” which libelously depicts the U.S. military and “greedy Jews” engaged in harvesting organs from prisoners and spraying crowds of civilians with machine gun fire. The effect of these diatribes, accompanied by a flurry of anti-American media publications, is that the public approval of the U.S., once high, is now in the single digits—the lowest level of any country in the entire region.<sup>5</sup> With anti-American statements coming from the AKP's highest levels and the mass media, anti-Americanism has become rampant in Turkey.

**An All-Time Low for Relations.** Anti-Americanism is not solely a function of U.S. policy toward Iraq. Turks are also very angry about U.S. policy toward the PKK and Northern Iraq, which they view as pro-Kurdish. The PKK has resumed suicide bombings in large cities in Turkey, while quartering in havens in Iraqi Kurdistan. The United States has worked to shut down the PKK's financial networks in Europe and appointed retired General Ralston as special envoy to cooperate with Turkey and counter the PKK. According to experts, the success of financial measures against the PKK has not been matched on the ground. The U.S. has failed to deliver tangible results—in the form of military action or arrests. Turkish officials claim that this status quo is severely harming the bilateral relationship.

While adeptly engaging the U.S. executive branch, the AKP also appears to be reorienting Tur-

key away from the West and toward the Muslim world. This includes the labeling of Israel as a “terrorist state” in 2004 and scaling down military cooperation with Jerusalem, as well as the growing rapprochement with Syria, culminating in President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Ankara in 2005 and Turkey's secret mediator role, aimed at transferring the Golan Heights to Syria. Turkey also played host in Ankara to a high-ranking delegation of Hamas terrorists led by Khaled Māshal.

A major factor drawing Turkey closer to Syria and Iran is a shared interest in maintaining stability in the face of Kurdish separatism. Another factor in the Turkish–Iranian rapprochement is energy. Turkey has recently concluded a multi-billion dollar gas deal with Iran. Turkey's relationship with Saudi Arabia has also strengthened of late. Relations with Egypt are growing apace, with dialogues on energy and security cooperation ongoing.

**What Washington Can Do.** Turkey will be a pivotal power in the region for so long as Iran and Iraq remain major challenges for U.S. foreign policy and as Russia becomes a source of increasing concern. It is in the strategic interest of the United States to have Turkey pursuing both democracy and economic growth and engaged in a cooperative relationship with Washington. The U.S. needs to make Ankara understand that it is an important partner but that it must play by the rules and respect U.S. national security interests in the region.

In order to improve U.S.–Turkish relations, the U.S. should place Turkey at the forefront of its regional diplomacy. Specifically, the U.S. needs to use every tool to address PKK terrorist attacks on Turkey from Northern Iraq. The U.S. should also put more pressure on President Masoud Barazani of the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil to crack down on PKK strongholds and deny PKK fighters safe haven.

In addition, the U.S. should emphasize to the AKP leadership that it is in Turkey's long-term interests to keep facing the West. This includes respect for the territorial integrity of Iraq, cooperation on sanctions against Iran, and maintaining

5. Pew Global Project Attitudes Survey, June 27, 2007, p. 13, at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/256.pdf>.

good relations with Israel. Also important is the cessation of anti-American incitement in the Turkish mass media.

The Bush Administration should expand cooperation with Turkey in the energy realm—especially on projects to boost oil and gas exports from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. Turkey can be an important partner in developing a Trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline (TCP) and should be encouraged to build bridges to the new administration in Turkmenistan. At the same time, Washington should warn Ankara that excessive dependence on either Russian or Iranian gas will jeopardize Turkey's sovereignty and security in the long term.

**Conclusion.** If domestic politics and the AKP's anti-Americanism are any guide, Turkey's apparent shift toward the Middle East and the Muslim

world could be more than a matter of passing expediency. Nevertheless, Washington should do everything it can to put U.S.–Turkish relations back on track. The U.S. should reach out to pro-Western elements in the Turkish foreign and security elite and work with them to restore the U.S.–Turkish strategic partnership.

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