



COUNTRY  
BACKGROUND  
SERIES

# Turkey

The historically strong Turkish-American alliance has come under strain, largely as a result of disagreements over the handling of the Iraq War. Still, the two continue to affirm a “strategic partnership,” cooperating on a host of regional initiatives. The Bush administration highlights the Turkish government, led by the Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP), as a model for reconciling Islam and democracy. The administration strongly supports Turkey’s candidacy for European Union membership, which impelled Ankara to undertake a series of democratic reforms before accession negotiations began in October 2005.

Those talks have since lost momentum. Meanwhile, domestic tensions remain high as the AKP – which in 2007 won a commanding majority in parliament – attempts to liberalize politics and ease strict restrictions on religion in public life in the face of a political establishment bent on preserving Turkey’s secular-nationalist foundational principles.

## I. General Interest

The strong partnership that has characterized relations between the United States and Turkey – NATO allies since the early days of the Cold War – is now being tested, largely due to disagreements over the handling of the Iraq war. Washington was furious with Ankara’s refusal to allow American forces to launch the 2003 invasion from Turkish territory, while Ankara resents Washington for encouraging Kurdish nationalism – which Turkey views as a threat to its territorial integrity – by permitting an increasingly autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan to emerge. Despite these tensions, both countries affirm that they remain “strategic partners,”<sup>1</sup> with similar goals of bringing stability to Iraq, combating terrorism, and securing Turkish accession to the European Union.

The U.S.-Turkey alliance is rooted in long-standing and extensive military cooperation. Turkey contributes troops<sup>2</sup> to NATO’s stabilization force in Afghanistan as well as to several UN peacekeeping missions. It also allows the American military to use a NATO base at Incirlik, through which the U.S. transports materiel to troops in Iraq. For its part, the U.S., in the aftermath of 9/11, dramatically increased monetary assistance to Turkey<sup>3</sup> as compensation for Ankara’s cooperation in the war on terrorism. More recently, however, Turkey expressed growing frustration with the United States for failing to counter the separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which launches attacks on Turkey from Iraq. In November 2007, the U.S. responded by sharing intelligence and allowing Turkey to conduct airstrikes as well as a limited incursion against the rebel group, helping to cool tensions between Ankara and Washington.<sup>4</sup>

Turkey garners a rating of “partly free” in the Freedom

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House index. Though Turks can freely elect their leaders, the country’s secular-nationalist elites have long used challenges to the country’s rigid foundational principles – in particular from Islamists and Kurdish nationalists – as a pretext for limiting civil liberties and retaining their own prerogatives. The current government, led by the Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP), has instituted wide-ranging democratic reforms in order to meet EU accession requirements. The outcome of negotiations with the EU, which began in October 2005, is likely to be a key determinant of how Turkey’s democracy evolves. In addition, the U.S. and Europe have an interest in Turkey continuing to develop as an energy transport corridor,<sup>5</sup> allowing Western nations to reduce dependence on Russian sources.

## II. Overview of U.S.-Turkey Relations

In order to counter Soviet influence on its borders, Turkey in 1947 accepted U.S. aid as part of the Truman

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Doctrine, and joined NATO in 1952. Though bilateral relations suffered briefly following Turkey's 1974 invasion of Cyprus, Turkish elites continued to believe the country's interests were best served by maintaining the American alliance, and thus sided with the U.S. over its neighbor Iraq in the Persian Gulf War and during the ensuing sanctions regime.

The Bush administration has come to view Turkey as a model of how a Muslim country can reconcile Islam with democracy. In January 2008, President Bush said, "Turkey sets a fantastic example for nations around the world to see where it's possible to have a democracy coexist with a great religion like Islam." The administration seeks to promote Turkish democratic development by encouraging the EU to accept Turkey's candidacy.<sup>6</sup>

### III. Major Political Groups

#### *Islamist Groups*

Political Islam has reached the heights of Turkish civilian political power on the back of the broad-based electoral appeal of the country's ruling Justice and Development Party. Since modern Turkey's founding in 1923, Islamist activity<sup>7</sup> has been opposed and sometimes violently repressed by members of the secular state establishment – known as Kemalists, after modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – who dominate the military and judiciary.

Islamism emerged as an organized political force in the late 1960s with the rise of the National Outlook Movement, whose members had some electoral success in the 1970s under the banner of the National Salvation Party. Running as the Welfare Party, Islamists placed first in the 1995 parliamentary elections, winning 21% of the vote. Welfare's leader, Necmettin Erbakan, became prime minister in 1996, marking the first time an Islamist was freely elected head of government in the Muslim world. The moment was short-lived, however, as the military deposed Welfare in a "soft" coup in 1997 for straying from secularism, and the party was legally disbanded.

Welfare's more conservative old guard now leads the Felicity Party, which has had little electoral success. In contrast, the electorate has embraced the AKP, which Welfare's reformist wing formed in 2001. Turkey's current prime minister, AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, took office shortly after his party's victory in the 2002 parli-

mentary elections, in which its 34% showing easily bested the 19% received by its nearest competitor.

The AKP's popularity was confirmed in the July 2007 parliamentary elections, when it captured nearly 47% of the vote and 341 out of 550 seats in parliament. The resounding victory gave the AKP the popular legitimacy to win a parliamentary vote in August 2007 to elevate Abdullah Gul, then the foreign minister, to the presidency – a position historically reserved for secularists. When first unsuccessfully attempted in April 2007, the move sparked a severe political crisis,<sup>8</sup> as secularists mobilized in fierce opposition to Gul's candidacy.

Despite the AKP's follow-through on its campaign promises to expand democracy and prioritize Turkey's entry into the EU, the country's secular establishment remains suspicious<sup>9</sup> that the party has a secret Islamist agenda. As evidence, they cite the AKP's efforts to restrict alcohol sales in a number of municipalities, its aborted attempt to criminalize adultery, as well as changes making it easier for students to attend religious high schools.

#### *Secular Groups*

The AKP's success has left the political opposition in considerable disarray. The party's socially conservative, pro-business message has co-opted votes from several center-right parties which held power in the 1980s and 90s but which are now out of parliament. Rising nationalist sentiment has found a home in the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which opposes Turkey's EU bid and holds 71 seats in parliament. Atatürk's center-left party, the staunchly secularist Republican People's Party, is the AKP's main challenger in parliament, with 112 seats. Turkey's Kurds split their votes in 2007 between the AKP – whose multiculturalist overtures, economic development programs, and religious conservatism have resonated in the troubled Kurdish southeast<sup>10</sup> – and independent candidates from the Democratic Society Party (DTP), a Kurdish nationalist party holding 20 seats whose legal right to exist is in jeopardy as the Constitutional Court prepares to rule on its alleged links to the outlawed PKK.

The Kemalist establishment, whose members in the military and judiciary wield extensive powers and often coordinate strategy, represents the most powerful check on the AKP's power. The military, which views itself as the guardian of Turkey's rigid secularism,<sup>11</sup> ousted civilian governments in 1960, 1971, and 1980. The incoming Chief

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of the General Staff, Ilker Basbug, is a staunch secularist but is expected to be less antagonistic toward the civilian government than was outgoing chief, Yasar Buyukanit, under whose tenure a military coup seemed possible in April 2007, when the AKP first nominated Gul as president.

Turkey's generals also cherish the military's reputation as the country's most trusted institution,<sup>12</sup> and the AKP's decisive re-election in July 2007 has made the generals reluctant to remove such a popular government. Kemalists in the judiciary, however, were not deterred from launching an ultimately unsuccessful suit in March 2008 to dissolve the AKP and ban its leading figures, including Prime Minister Erdogan and President Gul, from party politics for five years for allegedly being a "focal point of anti-secular activities."

### IV. Political Reform

#### *Perceptions of Political Reform and U.S. Democracy Promotion*

Further democratic reforms have considerable backing in Turkey, but rising nationalism – stemming from growing frustration with the EU over Turkey's floundering candidacy and with the U.S. over its reluctance to confront Kurdish militancy – appears to be dampening that support. A 2007 Pew Global Attitudes poll<sup>13</sup> found that 55% of Turks support a "democratic form of government," in contrast to 34% who prefer a "leader with a strong hand." Large majorities of Turks also stated that it was "very" or "somewhat" important to live in a country which had the following: fair elections (77%), the freedom to criticize the government (86%), impartial courts (89%), civilian control of the military (67%), and freedom of religion (88%). However, the poll also found that just 31% of Turks believe "democracy can work here" – down from a high of 50% in May 2003 – while 50% think "democracy is a Western way of doing things."

Around this same period, Turkish views of the United States and the EU soured significantly, with another 2007 Pew poll<sup>14</sup> registering favorability ratings of just 9% for the U.S. (down from 30% in 2002) and 27% for the EU (down from 58% in 2004).

Though support for democracy may not be rock-solid, Turks are not clamoring for theocracy either. The AKP has assembled such a large coalition precisely because it has shunned charged Islamist rhetoric and instead prioritized

Turkey's EU candidacy, anti-corruption, and economic growth – and couched its support for measures like lifting the headscarf ban not in terms of Islamic imperatives, but rather in the language of human rights.<sup>15</sup> Though secularists fear creeping Islamization – and, to be sure, there is evidence that public religiosity is on the rise in Turkey<sup>16</sup> – a 2006 poll conducted by the Turkish think-tank TESEV found that only 14.8% of Turks favor the establishment<sup>17</sup> of a Sharia-based religious regime.

#### *Political Institutions*

Turkey boasts a number of the trappings of a fully democratic state. Free and fair elections award four-year terms to 550 deputies in the unicameral Turkish Grand National Assembly. The prime minister, typically the leader of the party with the most seats in parliament, wields executive power along with the cabinet. The president, who is head of state and chief of the armed forces, will for the first time, in 2012, be elected by popular vote rather than by parliament.

However, Kemalists, retain vast powers to thwart democratic efforts to relax the rigidly secular and unitary nature of the state – principles which are enshrined in Articles 2 and 3 of the 1982 military-drafted constitution.<sup>18</sup> High-level military and judicial figures comment regularly on matters properly handled by the executive and legislative branches. Articles 68<sup>19</sup> and 69<sup>20</sup> allow the Chief Public Prosecutor to bring suits before the Constitutional Court to dissolve parties whose programs challenge the indivisible and secular nature of the state. Individuals also face significant legal restrictions on their freedom of expression. Article 301 of the 2005 penal code, which criminalizes insulting "Turkishness," is the most famous of dozens of laws on the books<sup>21</sup> limiting free speech.

Despite Kemalist intransigence, recent reforms have expanded civil liberties and reallocated power to elected officials by stripping the military of some of its prerogatives. In the run-up to the start of EU accession negotiations<sup>22</sup> in 2005, Turkey's AKP-led parliament eased restrictions on freedom of the press, transferred power to civilians on the National Security Council, expanded Kurdish cultural rights, abolished the death penalty, and banned the use of torture. Since negotiations began, an improved penal code went into effect, and implementation of earlier reforms has progressed.<sup>23</sup> However, the perception that the EU is backtracking on Turkish accession has sapped public sup-

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port and political will<sup>24</sup> for further sweeping reforms. As a result, the Turkish reform process has slowed perceptibly.

### *Prospects for Reform*

The Constitutional Court's decision in July 2008 to caution and penalize – but not ban – the AKP for anti-secular activities has set the stage for a reinvigoration of Turkey's reform process. A consensus has emerged<sup>25</sup> that the way to bridge the chasm of mistrust between Kemalists and the AKP is for the government to avoid sensitive religious issues<sup>26</sup> and instead focus its attention on democratic reforms. Indeed, the EU has renewed its calls for Turkey to recommit itself to the reform process by repealing Article 301<sup>27</sup> and promulgating an entirely new "civilian" constitution, a process which the AKP bungled last year by failing to solicit input from the political opposition on a draft charter it had prepared.

Whether or not the government resumes the reform process will depend on how the AKP – and, in particular, Prime Minister Erdogan, the party's undisputed leader – responds to the Court's reprieve. The razor-thin margin by which the party survived the Court's vote suggests that Erdogan would do well to return to the consensus politics that characterized the AKP's democratization campaign of 2002-5, lest he provide Kemalists with a pretext for launching another indictment. But some worry<sup>28</sup> he will interpret the Court's decision as vindication for his party and will thus resume the more confrontational style of the last two years.

## V. Congressional Policy and Foreign Assistance

### *Key Legislation*

Congress has not waded in deeply on the question of Turkish democracy. Over the years, a number of congressional resolutions, in the course of affirming the U.S.-Turkish alliance, have commended Turkey for improvements in its democracy. The House Foreign Affairs Committee made headlines in October 2007 when it passed a resolution labeling as "genocide" the mass killings of ethnic Armenians during the Ottoman Empire's final years. Strenuous lobbying by both Turkey and the Bush administration suc-

ceeded in indefinitely postponing a full floor vote on the measure. Whatever the merits of the bill, Turkey's angry reaction<sup>29</sup> could be a harbinger of how Ankara perceives future efforts by Congress to comment on Turkey's internal affairs.

Turkey receives significantly less foreign assistance today than it did in previous decades, when the U.S. provided military support during its arms race with Greece. Aid was scaled back in 1998 but revived after September 11, when Turkey received \$200 million in Economic Support Funds in 2002 for its participation in the war on terrorism, and was privately offered upwards of \$6 billion for full cooperation in the Iraq war. After refusing U.S. troops the right to invade Iraq from its territory, Ankara then rejected the \$1 billion grant<sup>30</sup> it was offered by Congress in 2003 which required it to renounce any possibility of a unilateral invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan. Annual military assistance since then has been relatively modest, totaling nearly \$20 million in 2007.<sup>31</sup>

### *Policy Outlook*

The public "neutrality" the U.S. displayed during the AKP closure case reflected the view among some observers that Washington best avoid pressuring Ankara on its internal affairs.<sup>32</sup> While Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice praised the AKP-led government, the Bush administration likely feared the potential retaliation from an empowered Turkish military should it win a power struggle with the AKP. That retaliation could take the form of uncooperative behavior from Turkey with respect to northern Iraq, Afghanistan, and energy issues. Other analysts counsel that vital, long-term U.S. interests lie in Turkey strengthening its position as a model democracy for the region, and that American policy should duly prioritize Turkey's continued democratic development.<sup>33</sup>

Exacerbating the stress on Turkish democracy is the political violence of the PKK. By allowing Turkey to strike at the group's sanctuary in Northern Iraq, Washington now has more credibility to press Ankara to find a political solution to its Kurdish problem. Still, American policymakers will find managing the competing interests of their Iraqi Kurdish and Turkish allies<sup>34</sup> to be an enduring challenge.

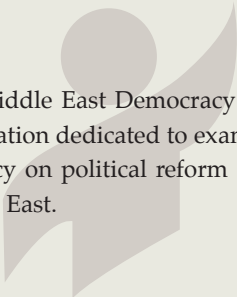
The key to Turkey's continuing democratization is

***"Whether or not the government resumes the reform process will depend on how the AKP – and, in particular, Prime Minister Erdogan, the party's undisputed leader – responds to the Court's reprieve."***

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keeping its EU candidacy on track. If Washington's efforts<sup>35</sup> to press Greek and Turkish Cypriots to reach a negotiated outcome one day bear fruit, it will remove a major obstacle in Turkey's accession path. What is uncertain – especially so long as another full-blown confrontation between the AKP and the secular establishment remains a possibility – is if there is sufficient political will in Ankara and EU capitals to make it all the way to full membership.

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The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East.

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