

The Middle East in Turkish-American Relations

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Options and Restraints for U.S. Policy in the Middle East: The Turkish Dimension

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In contrast to the negative appraisal of American foreign policy by some academics, it is important to stress that United States policy in the Middle East has scored striking achievements. Indeed, it can be claimed that the United States has been more successful in the Middle East than has any other outside power. Or, in a different context: American diplomatic efforts in the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1973 are arguably the most outstanding in the two century history of this country. Nonetheless, these policies could be further improved.

Schizophrenia is the greatest obstacle to an effective American policy in the Middle East. Symptoms of this affliction are apparent in the way the United States government deals with the Middle East. It approaches countries such as Turkey and Afghanistan concerned only with the Soviet threat; there, local issues disappear from the American vision. In others, including the Arab countries, Israel, and Iran, it sees only local issues; there, East-West affairs fade into the background. This double imbalance lies behind many of the shortcomings present in American Middle East policy.

Seeing Turkey exclusively through the prism of relations with the Soviet Union blinds Americans to the many other developments in this country, including a number directly affecting their interests.

In the Departments of State, Defense, and Treasury, in the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council, Turkish affairs are handled not, as an outsider would imagine, by the bureaus covering the Middle East. Rather, Turkey comes under the purview of the bureaus responsible for the Soviet Union, Europe, and Canada. More than any other factor, this institutional arrangement has the effect of making Turkey visible primarily in reference to the Soviet Union.

The reason for taking Turkey out of the Middle East and making it part of Europe is clear enough; in the American viewpoint, Turkish membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization entirely overshadows its

other activities. This transferral has the virtue of taking Turkey out of the confusion that characterizes American policy in the core of the Middle East, bringing it to the main arena of American foreign policy. But this advantage is purchased at a price: viewing Turkey as part of Europe means isolating it from the affairs of its true region, the Middle East. A toehold in the Balkans, membership in NATO, and participation in the Council of Europe notwithstanding, Turkey is not fruitfully understood as part of Europe. Culturally, religiously, politically, economically, it shares infinitely more with the countries of the Middle East.

Preoccupation with Turkey's role in the East-West conflict causes Americans to neglect the increasing importance of the Middle East in Turkish politics during recent years. There are many reasons behind this reorientation: a reaction against the Westernizing policies of the republic's first decades, alienation from European politics, the emergence of fundamentalist Islam in Turkish life, the greater wealth and power of some Middle Eastern states, booming trade with the oil exporting countries, and the massive employment of Turkish migrant labor there.

The greater role of the Middle East creates new issues for Turkey. Syrian claims to the Hatay province of Turkey, which have troubled Turkish-Syrian relations for 45 years, acquire enhanced importance. The oil pipeline crossing Turkey from Iraq to the Mediterranean takes on key importance in the Iraq-Iran war. Related to this, Turkish troops twice engaged in hot pursuit of Kurdish rebels into Iraqi territory. Turkish relations with Israel degenerate as Ankara places less emphasis on the concerns of the West and more on those of its Middle East neighbors.

Turkey's increasing involvement in Middle East politics creates the potential for American and Turkish cooperation in the Middle East: this appears most fruitful with reference to the Arab-Israeli and Iraq-Iran conflicts. In both cases, Turkey's good relations with the two sides of the dispute serve it well diplomatically.

Turkey has a unique position with regard to the Arab-Israeli dispute. Israelis remember that for three decades Turkey was the only Middle East state to maintain full diplomatic relations with it; Arab leaders see in it a fellow Muslim state that has led the way toward modernization while at the same time staying aloof from regional quarrels. Were Turkish leaders to offer their offices for Arab-Israeli diplomacy (as Romania and Morocco have done so successfully in the past), they could perform a signal service. These efforts might be done in conjunction with the United States for maximum impact.

Ankara has a potentially even more useful role to play in the Iraq-Iran war, for it has constantly improving relations with the belligerents; by now its relations may be better than those of any other government. As an indication, note that Iraq and Iran together took a mere 4 percent of Turkish exports in 1980, 16 percent in 1981, and almost 25 percent in 1982. Given Iraq and Iran's uneasy ties with the United States, and the

not much better ones with most of Western Europe, Turkey can take important steps, again, most profitably in consultation with its allies, toward a solution of the conflict.

Finally, a piece of advice for the United States government: Although bureaucratic arrangements are notoriously difficult to change, transferring Turkish affairs to the hands of Middle East specialists would instantly improve their understanding by officialdom.

In sum, the emphasis on the East-West conflict in Turkey leads to the neglect of local issues; conversely, the emphasis on local issues in the Arab countries, Israel, and Iran leads the U.S. to policies that ignore the main principles of its foreign relations. Were it possible to borrow some of the excess concern for the Soviet Union from the former category and apply it to the latter, policy toward all parts of the Middle East would benefit.