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Neo-cons take on Erdoğan

Monday, May 23, 2005

US right-wing hardliners increase attacks on AKP as potential Iran showdown looms. Michael Rubin: 'The special relationship with Turkey is over. Turkey will still be a friend, but not a partner.' Daniel Pipes: 'The AKP may want to overturn secularism'



WASHINGTON/ANKARA - Exclusive by TDN Defense Desk

When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a landslide victory in Turkey's November 2002 elections, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rise was first embraced by neo-conservatives, an influential U.S. group of politicians and thinkers keen to re-shape the Middle East by getting rid of anti-American dictators. Two-and-a-half-years later, the love affair seems to have turned into an undesired yet partly necessary cohabit.

In better times, Richard Perle, a key neo-con figure and a former U.S. assistant of defense, praised Erdoğan as a leader "in the line of revolutionary president and prime minister Turgut Ozal." The neo-cons hailed the AKP's "democratic nature" as it moved to curb the military's influence in line with European Union-motivated reforms.

During most of 2002 when the United States was preparing for the approaching Iraq war, then prime minister Bülent Ecevit, seen as leader of a nationalist three-way coalition government, and the Turkish military repeatedly made it clear that Ankara was highly reluctant to assist Washington in Iraq's invasion.

So the regime change came as a big relief for the U.S. administration that believed Erdoğan's AKP was much more flexible on Iraq. President George W. Bush held a red-carpet reception for Erdoğan at the White House even before the former Islamist hardliner became a member of parliament.

But many bigwigs in Washington believe Erdoğan and his second man Abdullah Gül failed to deliver. The AKP-controlled Turkish Parliament refused to allow U.S. forces to open a second war front from the north. Ask anyone on the streets of Washington, and you will hear that this single incident has poisoned the five-decade U.S.-Turkish relationship.

Things got worse last fall when Erdoğan and his lieutenants took a strong stand against U.S. military campaigns against a Sunni insurgency in Iraq, with one key AKP deputy even qualifying the operations as "genocide." Erdoğan also angered the powerful Jewish groups in the United States when he accused Israel of "state terrorism" when dealing with Palestinians.

The American side increasingly blamed Erdoğan and the AKP leadership for what it called rising anti-Americanism in Turkey. Douglas Feith, the Pentagon's outgoing number-three official and a key neo-con in the Bush administration, after a February visit to Ankara, said the relationship "cannot be sustained" if the high degree of anti-Americanism remains in place in Turkey.

Since then Erdoğan has been seeking to mend fences with Washington with flattering rhetoric and a planned meeting with Bush on June 8. The meeting comes at a time when, according to a top Turkish diplomat, the relationship between Turkey and the United States cannot be worse.

The neo-con view of Erdoğan and the AKP is totally different from what it was two-and-a-half years ago. Some key neo-con thinkers have already concluded that the special U.S.-Turkish relationship is over because of Erdoğan's mismanagement, while some others accused the AKP of trying to destroy Turkey's secular system.

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A recent debate organized by the conservative Front Page Magazine highlighted this mistrust.

"The special relationship with Turkey is over. Turkey will still be a friend, but not a partner," said Michael Rubin, a former advisor to U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and a Middle East specialist with the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute. "Can Turkey be counted on in the war against terror? No. ... Is Turkey a force for democracy in the region? No. Why else would the Turkish government side with Syria against the Lebanese people? Parliamentary Speaker Bülent Arinc's statement that the National Assembly, in which the AKP holds an absolute majority, has the power to abolish the Constitutional Court undercuts the idea that the AKP really values democracy."

Rubin said the U.S.-Turkish relationship probably was beyond redemption. "Whether Turkey deserves EU membership and the degree to which America should support it is increasingly moot. France will not shed their fundamental racism. The AKP may have sought to curry (French President Jacques) Chirac's support by buying Airbus, but the French government has slapped Turkey down. European officials will try to humiliate Turkey. Ankara is becoming more isolated than it has ever been before. I wonder whether this was the AKP's intention all along. Erdoğan and Gül are smarter than they are honest. If the AKP can break the alliance with Washington, Brussels, and eventually Moscow, then AKP strategists may figure that Turks will have no choice but to embrace Damascus, Riyadh, and Tehran. It is a shame that the Turkish-American relationship has fallen so far. I fear we are past the point of recovery."

Rubin also voiced doubts over the future of Turkey's secular structure. "It would be a mistake to suggest that, because Turkey separates religion and government, that there is not a threat to Turkish secularism. The very fact that we need to debate the AKP's intentions suggests there is. The two basic questions are whether the AKP really respects traditional Turkish values and whether Turkish secularism is strong enough to withstand the AKP agenda. The answers to these questions will determine to what degree Turkey will remain a friend to the West's democracies," he said. "The AKP's commitment to secularism is unclear. In May 2004, Erdoğan pushed an education bill, which aimed to ease entry of religious school graduates into Turkey's university system, basically allowing them to bypass secular state schools. While Erdoğan eventually withdrew the bill, its impact would have been enormous."

Daniel Pipes, another neo-con and director of the Middle East Forum, went further, saying the AKP may want to overturn secularism.

Erdoğan "is young enough, clever enough, and popular enough to stay in power ... almost imperceptively, to undo the entire revolution," he said. "I do expect that when the Islamist AKP feels strong enough and the circumstances are right, they will attempt to reverse [the system]. This prospect should be a matter of huge concern."

But Pipes said the United States did not have favorable alternatives. "U.S. options are not terribly attractive. One-step is vocally to appreciate the military's role in staunching radical Islam. A second one is to urge a change in the minimum needed for a party to win parliamentary representation, thus cutting into the AKP's huge majority," he said.

Despite recently escalated efforts by Erdoğan to win hearts and minds in Washington, some analysts suggest that the neo-cons really believe it is over with Turkey and that from this point on only minimum working relations could remain in place.

Some others say that because Turkey neighbors Iran and Syria, two of the United States' key enemies, Washington will always need some degree of cooperation in whatever it does with the two.

Asked if the problem over Iran's nuclear activities could be solved peacefully, a European observer said: "Look, Iran, the United States' worst adversary, is moving in a determined fashion to obtain nuclear weapons. And the president of the United States is George Bush. Do you need more clues?"

"Maybe the neo-cons, by being too harsh on Erdoğan, want to scare him before his Washington visit. They might be hoping that this might force Erdoğan to agree to some kind of cooperation about Iran," said one Washington-based analyst. "But the question is this: After seeing what happened concerning Iraq, would what he could say be taken seriously?"

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