

excerpts from “Turkey as a US Security Partner”

RAND Corporation, April 2008

[emphasis added]

Summary

In the future, Turkey is likely to be an increasingly less-predictable and more-difficult ally. While Turkey will continue to want good ties with the United States, **Turkey is likely to be drawn more heavily into the Middle East by the Kurdish issue, Iran’s nuclear ambitions, and the fallout from the crisis in Lebanon.** As a result, the tension between Turkey’s Western identity and its Middle Eastern orientation is likely to grow. At the same time, the divergences between U.S. and Turkish interests that have manifested themselves over the last decade are likely to increase (see pp. 7–14, 17–19).

Given its growing equities in the Middle East, as well as the current strains in U.S.–Turkish relations, Turkey will be even more reluctant to allow the United States to use its bases in the future, particularly the air base at Incirlik, to undertake combat operations in the Middle East (see p. 29). President Turgut Özal’s willingness to allow the United States to fly sorties out of Incirlik during the 1991 Gulf War was the exception, not the rule. Since then, Turkey has increasingly restricted U.S. use of Incirlik for combat missions in the Middle East. Thus, the United States should not count on being able to use Turkish bases, particularly Incirlik, as a staging area for combat operations in the Gulf region and the Middle East (see p. 25).

Moreover, given the importance of the Kurdish issue for Turkish security, Turkey has strong reasons to pursue good ties with Iran and Syria (see pp. 11–14), **both of which share Turkey’s desire to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state. Turkey’s growing energy ties with Iran have reinforced interest in that particular relationship.**

Thus, Turkey is unlikely to support U.S. policies aimed at isolating Iran and Syria or overthrowing the regimes in either country (see pp. 11–14). Rather, Ankara is likely to favor policies aimed at engaging Iran and Syria and to encourage the United States to open dialogues with both countries (see pp. 11–14).

Turkey’s interest in good relations with Iran and Syria represents a potential point of tension in U.S.–Turkish relations and highlights the need for the United States to consult closely with Ankara to try to ensure that U.S. and Turkish policies do not operate at cross purposes. Like the United States, Turkey does not want to see a nuclear-armed Iran. **While it does not perceive an existential threat from a nuclear-armed Iran, Ankara fears that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons could destabilize the Gulf region** and force Turkey to take defensive countermeasures to safeguard its own security (see pp. 12–13).

However, while Turkish officials are concerned about the long-term security implications of a nuclear-armed Iran, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s government is strongly opposed to a military strike against Tehran, which it believes could further destabilize the region. Thus, the United States could not count on the use of Turkish bases in any military operation against Iran. Indeed, such a strike could provoke a serious crisis in U.S.–Turkish relations and significantly exacerbate current strains with Ankara (see p. 13).

In the near term, however, the most important source of potential discord between the United States and Turkey is likely to be over how to deal with the terrorist attacks the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) conducts from sanctuaries in northern Iraq (see pp. 7–11). The number of Turkish security forces the PKK has killed has risen dramatically over the last year. Domestic pressure, especially from the Turkish military, has been growing for Turkey to take unilateral military action against the PKK. The landslide victory by the Justice and Development Party in the July 22, 2007, parliamentary elections has strengthened Erdogan’s hand politically and bought him some breathing room diplomatically. But if the attacks intensify in the aftermath of the elections, Erdogan could again face growing domestic pressure to take unilateral military action against the PKK (see pp. 10–11).

Turkish officials will be watching closely to see how U.S. strategy toward Iraq evolves. **Ankara does not want to see a precipitous withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq because that could lead to greater sectarian violence and draw in other outside powers—especially Iran and Syria, but possibly also Saudi Arabia. However, Turkey is adamantly opposed to increased deployment of U.S. troops in northern Iraq.** Turkish officials have warned that such a move would sharply reduce Turkish cooperation with the United States and exacerbate strains in U.S.–Turkish relations.

The strains in Turkey’s relations with the European Union are likely to affect U.S.–Turkish relations. In the past, when its relations with the European Union were bad, Turkey could always turn to the United States for support. But this option is no longer available. For the first time in decades, Turkey’s relations with both Washington and Brussels are strained at the same time. The simultaneous deterioration of relations with the United States and the European Union has reinforced a growing sense of vulnerability and nationalism in Turkey. Turkey increasingly feels that it cannot count on the support of its traditional allies and must rely on its own devices (see pp. 22–23).

In short, the United States will need to get used to dealing with a more independent-minded and assertive Turkey—one whose interests do not always coincide with U.S. interests, especially in the Middle East. The Kurdish issue in particular could cause new divergences. How the United States handles this issue is likely to be a litmus test of the value of the U.S.–Turkish alliance in Turkish eyes. If the United States fails to take action to deal more resolutely with the PKK issue, U.S.–Turkish relations are likely to deteriorate further, and anti-Americanism in Turkey, already strong, is likely to grow.

The United States should also be careful not to present Turkey as a “model” for the Middle East, as some U.S. officials have been wont to do. This irritates many Turks, especially the Westernized elite and military, who fear that it will weaken Turkey’s ties to the West and strengthen the role of Islam in Turkish politics (see p. 31). At the same time, the idea of Turkey as a model does not resonate well with the Arab states in the Middle East, which continue to resent Turkey’s role as a former colonial power in the region.

The modernization of Turkish society will also pose important challenges for U.S. policy. The democratization process in Turkey over the last several decades has opened up opportunities for new groups, some of them Islamist, to enter the political arena and has eroded the ability of the traditional Kemalist elite to direct and manage Turkish foreign policy. Today, political debate in Turkey is much more open and diverse than it was 20 or 30 years ago. At the same time, as new political forces and actors enter the political arena, tensions between secularists and Islamists are likely to grow, leading to greater internal strains and political polarization (see pp. 31–21).

Iran

Iran presents a longer-term security challenge. Iran’s growing regional influence since the U.S. invasion of Iraq is a concern in Ankara. So is the prospect that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons. At the same time, Turkey has a strong incentive to maintain good ties with Iran. The two countries share a common concern about the growth of Kurdish nationalism. This has led to an intensification of cooperation in the security field. During Erdogan’s visit to Tehran in July 2004, Turkey and Iran signed a security agreement that branded the PKK a terrorist organization. Since then, the two countries have stepped up cooperation to protect their borders against guerrilla attacks by the PKK and its affiliates.

Energy is also a major driver behind the warming of Turkey’s ties with Iran. Iran is the second largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey after Russia. In July 1996, shortly after taking office, Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan concluded a \$23 billion natural-gas deal with Iran. The deal set the framework for delivery of natural gas for the following 25 years. However, the deal also caused strains with the United States because it ran contrary to U.S. efforts to isolate Iran and prevent third-country investment there.

In the decade since then, energy ties have continued to expand. In July 2007, Turkey and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding to transport 30 billion m³ of Iranian and Turkmen natural gas from Iran to Europe. The deal envisages the construction of two separate pipe-lines to ship gas from Iranian and Turkmen gas fields. In addition, the state-owned Turkish Petroleum Corporation will be granted licenses to develop three different sections of Iran’s South Pars gas field, which has estimated total recoverable reserves of 14 trillion m³.¹¹ These plans have drawn criticism from the United States, which continues to oppose third-country investment in Iran and favors transporting Turkmen gas by routes that

avoid Iran.¹²

Turkey's growing cooperation with Iran in recent years, especially in the energy sector, highlights the degree to which U.S. and Turkish strategic perspectives in the Middle East have begun to diverge in some areas. Turkey has a strong political and economic stake in maintaining good ties with Iran. Ankara has thus been concerned about the calls for regime change in Tehran that some U.S. officials and outside specialists have made, which Ankara fears would further destabilize the Middle East. Instead, it has favored the establishment of a diplomatic dialogue with Tehran—a move advocated by the Baker-Hamilton report on Iraq.¹³

However, Turkey does not want to see the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran. While it does not perceive an existential threat from an Iran armed with nuclear weapons, Ankara fears that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could destabilize the Gulf region and force Turkey to take defensive countermeasures to safeguard its own security. **Turkey has essentially three options for countering the Iranian nuclear challenge:**

- **expand cooperation on missile defense with the United States and Israel**
- **beef up its conventional capabilities, especially medium-range missiles**
- **develop its own nuclear capability.**

The third of these would clearly be a last resort. It would only be undertaken if there were a serious deterioration of Turkey's security situation, i.e., if relations with the United States seriously deteriorated and if NATO's security guarantees no longer appeared credible. But given Turkey's current difficulties with Washington and Brussels—as well as the growing strength of nationalism in Turkey of late—the nuclear option cannot be entirely excluded.

The prospect that Iran may develop nuclear weapons is likely to heighten Turkish interest in missile defense. However, current U.S. plans to deploy elements of a missile-defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic are designed to provide protection against long-range missile threats from Iran and North Korea. They exclude Turkey and parts of southern Europe. Therefore, as it shapes its approach to missile defense in the coming decade, the United States also needs to consider how this deployment will affect Turkish security. Otherwise, current plans—which leave Turkey exposed—could exacerbate Turkish security concerns and generate new strains in U.S.–Turkish relations.

However, while Turkish officials are concerned about the long-term security implications of a nuclear-armed Iran, the Erdogan government is strongly opposed to a military strike against Tehran, which it believes could further destabilize the region. The United States could therefore not count on the use of Turkish bases in any military operation against Iran. Indeed, a U.S. military strike against Iran could provoke a serious crisis in U.S.–Turkish relations and significantly exacerbate current strains.