



U.S.-Turkish Relations in the Post Cold-War Era: The Ankara Perspective

Hasan Koni

of the Ankara University Political Science Faculty and the
Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies Research (ASAM)

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On September 12, the CSIS Turkey Project organized a discussion on U.S.-Turkish relations with Professor Hasan Koni of the Ankara University Political Science Faculty and the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies Research (ASAM).

Koni, who also lectures at both the National Security Academy and the National Police Academy, conveyed a disturbing message relating to Ankara's perspective on relations with Washington a decade after the end of the Cold War. Directly confronting much of the prevailing conventional wisdom concerning the strength and health of the bilateral relationship, Koni also challenged the optimistic assessments of Turkey's relations with Europe, the Caspian region, and the Middle East, while cautioning the audience on the likelihood of serious turbulence in Turkish domestic politics in the coming months.

"The Pressures of Marginalization"

Koni argued that despite its pivotal contribution to addressing security threats in Iraq and the Balkans, Turkey continued to be viewed only in the context of its former role on the periphery of the Soviet Union, and was thus marginalized by the West at the beginning of the post-Cold War era. The West's ambivalence toward Ankara's role in the so-called New World Order was also linked to Turkey's efforts to address both old problems and new threats to its security. Parallel to Turkey's ongoing effort to defeat the insurgency by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in its turbulent southeast, Western Europe castigated Turkey for alleged human rights abuses. As Turkey's Kurdish conflict took on an international dimension, so too did the forces of political Islam, opposed to Turkey's strict observance of secular democracy, presenting both an additional threat to Turkish society and a new focal point for further international criticism of Turkish democracy.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey's ethnic ties to the peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia were expected to play a pivotal role in the region's democratic transition. Yet, even as many U.S. policymakers still view Turkey as a leader and example to the states of the Caspian region, Koni declared that Turkey had already "lost" the Caucasus and Central Asia by 1992. He tied this failure to U.S. policy toward the region, which Koni argued was based on "geoeconomic" rather than "geopolitical" principles throughout both terms of the Clinton administration. Washington's policy, from Ankara's perspective, Koni said, appeared to be based on a conviction that with "the end of history," free markets would lead to free societies.

Koni roundly criticized Turkey's efforts over the past decade to procure energy resources from the Caspian region to feed its rapidly expanding economy and consumer demand. "Turkey's energy policy is a shambles," declared Koni, particularly in respect to the U.S.-Turkish partnership to transport Caspian oil and gas resources to Western markets via Turkey. Russia's new activism in the Caucasus and Central Asia under the Putin administration, he argued, threatens to overwhelm the region. Beyond glowing rhetoric, failure to address Moscow's aggression, according to Koni, betrays Washington's "Russia-first" sentiments, leaving its dedication to the U.S.-Turkish partnership in question for many policymakers in Ankara. At the same time, the U.S.-Turkish strategic relationship has been further complicated by the lobbying efforts of Greek-American and Armenian-American groups that echoed Western European criticism of Turkish shortcomings in civil-military relations, human rights, and democratic freedoms.

Turkey's Response

Koni viewed contemporary Turkish foreign policy to a great extent as a product of Ankara's suspicion toward perceived efforts to minimize Turkey's role on the international stage. Turkey's wide-ranging strategic partnership with Israel beginning in 1996 paid dividends both in Turkey's successful pressure on Syria, which supported the PKK and sheltered its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, as well as in efforts to improve Turkey's image in Washington, courtesy of the "Israel lobby." Koni characterized Turkish-Israeli relations as, in a sense, "an effort to cope with its allies" as much as an effort to address its security concerns. He specifically criticized the fact that U.S. arms sales to Turkey are condemned without consideration of legitimate security threats from its "rogue state" neighbors, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

Much has been made of improved relations between Greece and Turkey as a result of last year's "earthquake diplomacy." Koni argued that it was not the exchanges of aid and assistance in August 1999 but the capture of Ocalan after he had sought shelter in the Greek Embassy in Nairobi in February 1999 that began the détente after decades of diplomatic chill between Ankara and Athens. Koni also argued, however, that although Greek and Turkish officials have met and innumerable speeches, gestures, and exchanges have been made, the atmospherics have yet to resolve such long-standing issues as maritime boundaries in the Aegean Sea and the Cyprus problem.

The European Union's rejection of Turkey's membership bid in 1997 was viewed in Ankara as evidence of Western Europe's self-limiting view of Turkey's overall potential as an international player. Koni argued that among policymakers in both Western Europe and the United States, a subsequent return to geopolitical perspectives has marked a renewed appreciation of Turkey's strategic importance in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caspian region. The rise of proliferation concerns, ethnic conflict, and regional instability made Turkey as relevant as ever in addressing the challenges of the post-Cold War world and prompted the EU to accept Turkey as a candidate for membership in December 1999, despite continuing human rights problems.

Storm Warning

Koni warned that there was growing suspicion among the Turkish establishment of the EU candidacy. In the wake of the EU's rejection of Turkey in 1997, Koni recalled that a deputy from the Motherland Party had published a book entitled "The Turkey That Can Say 'No.'" With the EU's decision to extend an invitation to Turkey came inevitable demands for Turkey to harmonize its political and economic institutions with those of Western Europe. Calls to transfer authority from the political center to the regions have led to concern that Turkey may face future political fragmentation. Similarly, European entreaties to end threats to close down pro-Islamic and Kurdish parties have been viewed by some as undue violations of Turkey's sovereignty.

According to Koni, an increasing number of Turkish critics are coming to view the price of admission to the EU as simply too costly. Koni noted that, as a result, Turkey's Islamists and Kurds have become supporters of EU membership for its promise of greater freedoms, while Turkey's military, the constitutionally mandated guardians of political secularism and standard bearers for Turkey's integration with the West, find themselves in a quandary. Koni displayed a new book written by a retired general entitled "No to the European Union," arguing that this was illustrative of a new debate among a growing number of Turkish "Euroskeptics." He noted that no general could publish such a book without the politically influential military establishment's permission.

Koni argued that the suspicion of Western Europe's desire to minimize the role of Turkey in the Balkan, Middle Eastern, and Caucasus regions has grown into frustration with its allies as it struggles to cope with the challenges of the new century. Speaking on the twentieth anniversary of Turkey's last outright military coup, Koni volunteered the chilling prediction that if these frustrations on the part of Turkish policymakers are not addressed by an enthusiastically critical international community, that another such intervention may not be out of the question in the near future.