



TURKEY UPDATE

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CLINTON IN TURKEY: REVIEWING “THE TURKISH MODEL”

On Monday, November 15, President Bill Clinton met with Turkish President Suleyman Demirel and Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit and spoke to the Turkish Grand National Assembly (GNA) in Ankara on the first day of his official visit to Turkey. The visit, the first by a U.S. president in eight years, witnessed discussion on a range of diplomatic issues. These included Turco-Greek relations and the resumption of negotiations over the future of Cyprus, Turkey’s future relations with the European Union, and the current crisis in the Caucasus. The U.S.-supported Turkish efforts to conclude agreements with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkmenistan on the transportation of Caspian oil and gas to markets through Turkey was also prominent on the agenda. In short, the two countries endeavored to solidify their close strategic and diplomatic partnership on the eve of the OSCE summit in Istanbul on November 17-19.

At a joint press conference after his meeting with Demirel, Clinton said that it was, “fitting that Turkey was the host for the OSCE meeting,” as Turkey was, “the key to meeting all the challenges that remained for Europe,” including, “bridging the gulf between the West and the Islamic World.” Clinton had signaled this major theme of his visit in a policy speech in Washington on November 8, in which he argued “the coming century will be shaped in good measure by the way in which Turkey itself defines its future and its role today and tomorrow.” According to Clinton, Turkey was “at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia; the future can be shaped for the better if Turkey can become fully a part of Europe, as a stable, democratic, secular, Islamic nation.”

The Clintonian vision for Turkey has to be seen not only in the bilateral U.S.-Turkish relationship but also in the wider global context. The Clinton Administration has long supported Turkish inclusion in the process of European Union expansion and has justified its policy as an integral part of its broader policy of accommodation between the West and the Islamic world. However, the vision does not match the reality of Turkish politics, which is shaped by the continuing struggle between powerful forces determined to maintain Turkish secularism and the Islamists who are challenging it. Although, the outcome of the conflict will ultimately be determined in Turkey itself, the United States, as the leader of the western world and as Turkey’s premier strategic partner, will clearly have a role in the process.

PRE-VISIT DEBATE IN WASHINGTON

Just before Clinton left for Turkey, Washington played host to a delegation from Turkey’s Islamist Virtue Party (VP), headed by its leader, Recai Kutan. The visit followed closely that of recently retired General Cevik Bir, who had played a leading role in 1997 as deputy chief

of staff in the military establishment's successful campaign to force the Islamist-led coalition out of office. Prime Minister Ecevit who heads the current three-party ruling coalition, which does not include the VP, had himself visited Washington for talks with Clinton at the end of September.

Kutan and Bir offered predictably different visions of Turkey's future and underlined the central conflict in contemporary Turkish politics. At meetings with members of the administration, as well as at a number of speaking engagements around town, the VP delegation engaged in a major public relations exercise designed to allay U.S. concerns over its goals and means. Kutan's goal was undoubtedly to try to ensure American support against the possible closing down of the VP. However, in view of the unwillingness of the United States to react effectively against the eviction of the Islamists from government and the subsequent banning of the VP's predecessor, the Welfare Party (WP), despite numerous indications of a U.S. desire to maintain a working relationship with an Islamist-led coalition, it is unlikely that Kutan returned to Ankara armed with anything more than rhetorical assurances from U.S. officials relating to Turkish democracy.

At every opportunity Kutan insisted that the threat of Islamic fundamentalism was exaggerated by Turkey's military and civilian establishment in order to deny his party a key role in the nation's political future. He said that the VP did not have as its ultimate objective a fundamentalist state. While conceding that some fringe elements had expressed support for an Iranian-style regime, he argued that they were unrepresentative of the Islamist mainstream. Kutan wanted the VP to be seen as a democratic party and rejected a choice between being an Islamist and a democrat. The interpretation of secularism, the second principle of the state according to the Turkish constitution, was at the heart of Kutan's arguments. His understanding of the constitution was that it allowed freedom of religious expression, a right he claimed was denied in contemporary Turkey in the name of a strong state. VP's opposition to Turkey's secularism, Kutan charged, had been misrepresented as opposition to secularism per se. In fact, he said, the Islamists only wanted the implementation of secularism that exists in the Anglo-Saxon tradition and, above all, in the United States.

While these arguments may have sounded eminently reasonable in Washington, as Clinton's subsequent statements seemed to confirm, they were certain to fall on some powerful deaf ears in Ankara. The Turkish military continues to view its guardianship of Turkey's secular state against the fundamentalist threat very seriously, and this confrontation dwarfs the petty and intricate intrigues of daily party politics. A recent declaration by the Chief of Staff, General Huseyin Kivrikoglu, for example, reaffirmed that the military would, "fight fundamentalism for 1000 years."

After promoting what was called "the unarmed coup" against the WP-led government in 1997, the military had generally been content to stay in the background. Deriving vindication from the poor showing of the VP in the April parliamentary elections, the armed forces have been looking to the secular establishment to maintain the line against the perceived Islamist threat. In May, Turkey's chief prosecutor, Vural Savas, filed an indictment in Turkey's Constitutional Court against the VP, charging that it was a

continuation of the outlawed WP and a “focal point for illegal activity.” Savas submitted a number of recorded statements by former WP members calling for a “shari’a” regime to be instituted in Turkey, as well as conversations between VP leaders and Necmettin Erbakan, the former WP leader banned from politics by the Constitutional Court. After the GNA amended Turkey’s Political Parties Law in August to transfer liability for inflammatory speech from political parties to individual members – move that was interpreted as a way of sparing the VP the fate of its predecessor – Savas countered in October by repeating his demand for VP’s closure, adding, for good measure, a request that the Constitutional Court to declare the Parties Law amendment unconstitutional.

Although Prime Minister Ecevit had taken the lead in the parliamentary row over VP member Merve Kavakci taking her oath in a Muslim headscarf, it has become apparent that Ecevit and the other secular party leaders, along with President Demirel, were reluctant to act more aggressively against the Islamists. Their reticence was widely interpreted as a product of the politicians’ traditional pragmatism, not least because the VP parliamentary delegation constitutes a significant part of their calculations as the GNA approaches choosing Turkey’s president in the spring of 2000. Predictably, the military felt obliged to make its own weight felt in the equation.

The funeral last month, of the murdered former minister of culture and secular academic-columnist Ahmet Taner Kislali, for example, saw the participation of the entire military establishment in a gesture that one top commander hoped “would be understood.” At the same time, there was a stream of criticism from pro-secular academics and columnists of the government for going “soft” on fundamentalism. The October meeting of Turkey’s National Security Council (NSC), an executive advisory body comprising top military and civilian figures, led to a renewed request for the full and rapid implementation by the government of the February 28, 1997, demands that had eventually brought down the WP-led coalition.

During his Washington visit where he also spoke at CSIS, General Bir explained that institutions are built according to a nation’s given conditions and imperatives, and in the case of Turkey, the military had a constitutional obligation approved by the GNA to protect the Turkish state. Bir argued that Turkey’s NSC coordinated security policy against outside threats, while providing a forum for the military’s voice to be heard in domestic policy issues. Bir noted that although the NSC has been viewed skeptically by Western observers, it was essential to confront the greatest security threats, which came from within, namely from Islamic fundamentalism and Kurdish terrorism. Bir observed that the top generals who serve on the NSC have 40 years of professional decision-making experience behind them, making them ideal participants in the policymaking process to confront the unique threats faced by Turkey,

CORRUPTION

As in every other aspect of Turkish political life, the issue of corruption occupies a central role in the struggle between secularism and political Islam in Turkey. A perennial and endemic problem in Turkish political life, corruption became even more of an issue in Turkey in the wake of the August 17 earthquake and the revelation of the shoddy

construction that contributed to the loss of lives and the official negligence that permitted it. The Turkish military establishment is rightly concerned that growing corruption will further alienate the electorate from the mainstream politicians and will be exploited even more successfully by the Islamists to pave the way for their return to power. Significantly, in his visit to Turkey, Pakistan's new leader, General Pervez Musharraf, explained to his hosts that corruption had forced him to mount his recent coup, and justified his action with reference to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey.

Past weeks have seen the arrest of over 40 people in the wake of testimony from recently captured notorious fugitive businessman Erol Evcil. It appears that Evcil was sheltered by influential politicians and bureaucrats who did not want him to be apprehended, and Evcil's testimony may finally shed light on the extent of the alleged collusion between organized crime and prominent politicians throughout the 1990s. The finger of suspicion will almost certainly point yet again to Mesut Yilmaz and his Motherland Party (MP), the junior member of the current ruling coalition, already under suspicion of corruption related to Russian gas deals and the privatization of the Turkish banking sector. It is also unlikely, that Tansu Ciller's True Path Party, which alternated in power in the last decade with the MP, will escape unscathed.

LOOKING AHEAD

The dilemma of the Turkish military is that while it remains the most powerful proponent of Turkey's membership of the Western community of nations, its vigorous defense of Turkish secularism and willingness to act in an undemocratic way when it deems it necessary – it has intervened in one fashion or another four times in as many decades – puts it at odds with the stated preferences of Turkey's Western partners. Although the military is unlikely to mount an outright coup again, as Bir confirmed, experience shows that the Turkish high command will also not accept a model for Turkey if this conflicts with their vision for the country. In any case, it seems certain that the Turkish military and its secular goals will remain an integral part of the Turkish political equation long after Clinton leaves office in January 2001.



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