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The End of the U.S-Turkey Alliance?

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Texas governor Rick Perry, the presidential candidate who believes the minimum voting age in the United States is twenty-one and that there are only eight justices on the U.S. Supreme Court, caused yet another furor during the GOP primary debate in South Carolina on January 16. In response to a question about whether Turkey should be allowed to remain in NATO, Perry stated that Turkey was “being ruled by what many would perceive to be Islamic terrorists.”

That comment struck most knowledgeable people as bizarre. While it is true that Turkey has become somewhat less secular over the past decade under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), that ruling party exhibits a moderate rather than a radical Islamist orientation. And the AKP is a far cry from being a nest of terrorists.

The Turkish government sharply criticized Perry’s allegations, but the official response was mild compared to the reaction of the Turkish media. “Rick Perry: What an Idiot,” fumed columnist Mustafa Akyol of the prominent *Hurriyet Daily News*. Turkey’s ambassador to the United States, Namik Tan, was more measured but still expressed his dismay that “Turkey and its time-tested ties of alliance, partnership and friendship with the United States” had become the object of “misplaced and ill-advised criticism” in the GOP debate. According to the ambassador, “Turkey is a secular democracy that has for decades been an essential and trusted partner of the United States.” On issues ranging from the fight against terrorism and violent extremism to the campaign against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, he said, Turkey stands “side by side” with the United States to tackle such challenges.

Although Perry's charges were preposterous, the spin from the Turkish government and media is not especially accurate either. On the domestic front, Turkey has become noticeably less secular in recent years, and there have been ugly outbreaks of anti-Semitic sentiments. The Erdogan government's tolerance of criticism and its treatment of political opponents also leave much to be desired, as regime critics justifiably complain of government harassment. But, it should be noted, Turkey was far from a model, tolerant democracy in earlier decades when the pro-Western, secular military was the principal power behind the scenes.

Although the growing Islamist influence may be troubling, the greatest—and from Washington's standpoint the most worrisome—changes in Turkey have occurred on the foreign-policy front. And those shifts are now so significant that it is a bit of a stretch to describe Ankara as a reliable U.S. ally despite Turkey's continued membership in NATO.

The policy estrangement between Washington and Ankara has been growing for nearly a decade. The first major disagreement emerged in late 2002 and early 2003 as the Bush administration prepared to launch the invasion of Iraq. U.S. leaders sought Ankara's permission to open a northern front from Turkish territory. Turkey's leaders, reflecting overwhelming public hostility to a war against Iraq, balked at the request and demanded a huge sum (reportedly in excess of \$30 billion) to permit such an operation. The demand angered Washington, and administration officials ultimately abandoned plans for a northern front.

The gap between U.S. and Turkish goals regarding Iraq has become a chasm in the years since Saddam Hussein's ouster. Both civilian and military Turkish leaders view the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq as a political magnet for Turkey's own Kurdish population and, therefore, as a potential threat to the unity of the Turkish state. Disagreements about policy in Iraq have served as a catalyst for a deepening chill in overall Turkish-U.S. relations.

There are other manifestations of estrangement between the two countries. Ankara seems to be de-emphasizing ties with its traditional NATO allies, including the United States, and is placing a priority on strengthening links with Muslim countries. There are several developments over the past four or five years that highlight that policy pivot.

The shift is perhaps most evident with respect to policy toward Iran. Ankara and Washington are on rather different pages about how to deal with Tehran's nuclear program. The Turkish government is especially wary of ever-deepening economic sanctions without the United States also providing opportunities for more constructive dialogue. Although Iran's continuing intransigence has caused the once-promising rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran to fade over the past year, the Erdogan government remains highly critical of the U.S./NATO policy of all sticks and no carrots toward Iran.

Ankara has also shifted its policies with respect to the Israeli-Arab dispute. Previously, Turkey maintained cooperative relations with Israel, much to the annoyance of other

Muslim states. But that has changed dramatically. Ankara's harsh criticism of the Israeli military offensive in Gaza in 2009 was an early indicator of a deteriorating relationship. Tensions became more acute the following year after Israeli special-forces units attacked and boarded ships in a Turkish-led relief flotilla, supposedly on a humanitarian mission to Gaza. Several Turkish nationals were killed in that confrontation, and relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv have reached a nadir since then.

The United States is deeply unhappy about Ankara's policies toward America's favorite ally in the region. Some of the same neoconservatives in the United States who had long praised Turkey as a vital U.S. ally have now become some of that country's sharpest critics. The fact that evangelical Christians are among Israel's biggest supporters, and Rick Perry is a favorite of that political faction, might at least partially explain his extraordinarily harsh assessment of Turkey in the South Carolina debate.

It is important for U.S. leaders and the American public to understand the reasons for Ankara's foreign-policy shift. In addition to Turkey's outreach to other Muslim nations—in part to foster Turkey's growing eastward pursuit of economic opportunities—there is an apparent quest for enhanced status as a serious regional power. Turkish leaders chafe at being expected to follow Washington's lead on every issue. Deferring to the United States may have made sense in the bipolar strategic environment of the Cold War, when Soviet power and intentions appeared to pose a serious threat to Turkey's security and the United States was the only country that could provide effective protection. But the situation in the twenty-first century is much different. The possible threats are both less serious and more diffuse. Therefore, blindly following Washington's policy lead is not only unnecessary, it could be counterproductive to Turkey's interests.

Turkey is not the only mid-size regional power that seems to have reached that conclusion. One sees manifestations of similar behavior on the part of such countries as Brazil and Indonesia. The policies of all three countries appear to reflect a drive for the twin goals of greater policy independence and greater prestige.

Without the existence of a mutual, great-power security threat to keep allies in line, Washington will find the kinds of policy deviations that Ankara is exhibiting to be more and more the norm. The bottom line is that Turkey is likely to be a somewhat unpredictable, independent regional power rather than a reliable ally of the United States in future years—notwithstanding the boilerplate professions of solidarity coming from the Turkish embassy and the U.S. State Department.

But it is also crucial not to exaggerate the extent of the change—as Governor Perry did in an especially clumsy and inflammatory fashion. Instead, the United States needs to adjust gracefully to a more challenging and nuanced relationship between the two countries. Just because Turkey has become a more independent policy actor does not mean that it is now an adversary, much less a terrorist adversary.