

PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION AND VISION: TURKEY AND THE U.S.

That the United States “has sought to use Turkey as a model of a moderate Islamic state for the Middle East” is a conviction which resonates widely in Turkey – with far reaching implications, for not only Turkey-U.S. relations but also Turkey’s democratization. The author refutes the arguments this conviction rests upon. Particularly delving into the changing currents in the Turkish military and the internal power balances, he points out the risks posed by conspiracy theories and the irresponsible evoking of notions of honor as Turkey “stumbles” into the 21st century.

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Turkey today is experiencing sharp domestic turmoil at the same time that its relations with the United States have soured dramatically. With a stunning “Pew Global Attitudes Survey” indicating that less than 10 percent of the Turks hold a favorable view of the United States, it is clear that something very unusual has been occurring in the country. The war in Iraq and the perception that U.S. support for Iraqi Kurds encourages broader Kurdish ambitions for an independent state that might include parts of Turkey are certainly important factors. Nevertheless, none of that explains the simultaneous drop in Turkish support for the European Union, the rise of Turkish nationalism, and the ongoing struggle between the ruling party and the Turkish military that has disrupted Turkish political and economic life. There is one highly unfortunate development, however, that ties all of this together in one dangerous package: The triumph of conspiracy theory over rationality.

Conspiracy theories have always been rampant in Turkey, but one has become so widely disseminated and thoroughly accepted that it has completely undermined Turkish-American relations. The gist is this: Beginning with the “New World Order” of the first President Bush and ranging through the “Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative” of the current President Bush, the United States has sought to use Turkey as a model of a moderate Islamic state for the Islamic countries of the Middle East. It has pursued this aim by bringing the AK Party to power and simultaneously weakening the secular nature of the state by undermining the Turkish military and the influence of the former establishment. “Proof” of this is clear and of long standing, including (a) the visit to Tayyip Erdoğan by a former American Consul General when he was in prison in Istanbul for reciting a famous Turkish poem in praise of militant Islam; (b) the reception of Tayyip Erdoğan at the White House with open arms by President Bush in 2002 even before he was a Member of Parliament, let alone the Prime Minister; (c) the public description of Turkey as an “Islamic Republic” by Secretary of State Powell in 2004 [immediately corrected]; (d) the heavy support of Turkey’s bid for membership in the EU and concomitant control of the military by civilian authorities; and most of all, (e) a series of actions perceived to be designed by the U.S. to weaken the Turkish Armed Forces.

In the past, no matter how tense the issues may have become in Turkish-American relations, the two militaries maintained close and mutually supportive ties. There was never any thought that our armed forces might actually clash in combat (even though the infamous Johnson letter in 1964 suggested lack of military support for Turkey if it invaded Cyprus and the Soviet Union sought to intervene.) That is no longer the case, and the following chain of events is cited in Turkey today as “proof” of American military enmity: (1) When TGS Chief General Özkök realized that the March 1, 2003, “tezkere” (resolution) debacle in the Parliament would seriously damage Turkey’s own interests, he called for a new vote only scant days later. According to the conspiracy theorists, that call

was snubbed by the U.S. because it had always planned to work with the Kurdish peshmerga, rather than Turkish forces. It was, after all, they say, the Kurdish deputies in the AK Party who voted against the March 1 motion and ensured its defeat—as well as the absence of greater Turkish forces in northern Iraq. (2) The press reported that American troops in Iraq stopped several Turkish military trucks carrying arms for the Turkmen in northern Iraq. (3) The lid was blown off American contempt for the Turkish military, they say, when U.S. forces arrested Turkish troops in Sulaimaniya on 4 July 2003, and insulted Turkish military honor by handcuffing and “bagging” the soldiers. (4) Despite the vote in the Parliament in October 2003, to approve the sending of 10,000 Turkish troops to Iraq at American request, the U.S. ultimately rejected the offer because of so-called Iraqi objections, again insulting Turkish forces—and common sense, they say, since everyone knows that the Americans run the show in Iraq, not the Iraqis. (5) Contrary to President Bush’s declaration that the U.S. would hunt down all terrorist groups in Iraq, it has never moved militarily against the PKK, despite the deaths of Turkish soldiers at the hands of the PKK on Turkish soil, further demonstrating its lack of respect for Turkish forces they say, and its support for Kurdish autonomy and eventual independence.

Until the advent of the AK Party and the gradual erosion of Turkish military influence throughout the government, Turkey had always been a “guided democracy,” with the guidance flowing from the Armed Forces to the media and elected but ultimately non-independent governments. Strong public support initially for the EU membership promised continued erosion of military influence and eventual genuine civilian control of the military, and continued failure by the military to assume a role of any importance in northern Iraq, the most sensitive of all border areas for Turkey, undercut the very reason d’être of the Turkish Armed Forces. They may well have felt that they could do no other than respond to these “threats” to their traditional role as the ultimate arbiters in Turkish affairs.

Most Turks simply accept that the Turkish General Staff lies at the heart of the so-called “deep state,” backed up by innumerable retired generals sitting on boards of important businesses and institutions throughout the country. Senior officers, both active and retired, genuinely believe that the preservation of the secular state has been placed in their hands by Atatürk and his successors. The military has always had close ties with what are today the major opposition parties, as well as connections to nationalist traditions and organizations.

News of the Sulaimaniya incident was passed to a prominent journalist with ties to the Turkish military and trumpeted as an unforgivable affront to the Turkish Armed Forces and the honor of the nation. The story was expanded and hammered home for days until the entire country was enraged. (The reason for the American action was classified and it has never been fully revealed to the

Turkish public) Other stories, many clearly false, began to appear in the Turkish media on such subjects as the deliberate killing of Iraqi civilians by American troops and the destruction of mosques in Iraq.

Not long afterward, reports began to arise from the Turkish military academies in Istanbul of senior military officers declaring that the U.S. is untrustworthy and predicting that it will become an actual enemy of Turkey.

Retired generals attending American speaking events in Istanbul began to ask why the U.S. would favor Iraqi Kurds over its long-time ally Turkey and why the U.S. would wish for Turkey to become a moderate Islamic republic. When told that neither proposition was true, they would smile politely and repeat the same questions at the next event.

The hugely popular anti-American novel “Metal Storm” appeared in late 2004 with its tale of an invasion of Turkey by duplicitous American forces seeking control of boron resources, who are only defeated in the end with the help of the Russians and Europeans. One of the co-authors is an ex-journalist specializing in defense issues with ties to the Turkish military.

The virulently anti-American film “Valley of the Wolves-Iraq” appeared in early 2006 with its nightmare scenario of American officers cutting organs from Iraqis for sale on the world market. The film begins with a re-enactment of the “bagging” incident in Sulaimaniya which leads to the suicide of a Turkish soldier bereft of his honor, who is avenged in Iraq by heroic protagonist Polat Alemdar, who works on behalf of the Turkish “deep state” and manages to kill all of the offending Americans. One Turkish master’s thesis has documented that the television series from which the film was developed has clearly promoted “nationalist ideologies” throughout its highly popular run. Boasting the largest budget in Turkish film history, 10 million dollars, the film was funded in part by one of the newspapers that first broke the story on the events in Sulaimaniya.

During roughly the same period, the initial enthusiasm for the EU membership in Turkey began to wane and then drop heavily in conjunction with a rise of nationalist sentiment in the country, including revival of the tired cliché stemming from the Treaty of Sevres that Western powers are seeking to weaken and divide Turkey, in this case by supporting the AK Party and the social liberalization required by the EU and undermining the power of the military.

By now, almost all Turks believe to some degree that the U.S. stands behind the AK party as part of its desire to shift the balance in the Middle East toward Islamic moderation and that it supports an independent state for the Kurds in northern Iraq as part of the same scenario. CHP leader Baykal has publicly blamed the failure of his party to gain ground in the recent elections on the U.S.

(Of course, Baykal, who has aligned his supposedly social democrat party with the nationalists and the military, has also claimed that the CIA is trying to kill him.)

Leaders of the AK Party, who clearly know that the U.S. has not involved itself in Turkish domestic politics and has no wish to alter the secular nature of the state have not distinguished themselves by disputing even the most outrageous conspiracy theories aimed at the U.S. Indeed, many of the most wild-eyed accusations made about American atrocities in Iraq have come from the more Islamist wing of the AK Party itself, in accord with its Sunni sentiments and tendency to credit jihadist propaganda statements. More moderate party leaders may have deliberately stepped back from defusing anti-Americanism in Turkey out of concern that supportive statements or actions might simply tend to support the belief that AKP is a creature of the U.S.

The U.S. needs to improve its relations with the Turkish military establishment, so that it will not only cease its support for anti-Americanism but actually provide the positive influence on our relations that it exerted in the past. And the U.S. needs to attack and discredit head-on the belief now ingrained in the Turkish psyche that the U.S. is trying to shape events in Turkey as part of a grand design to offer it as a model Islamic Republic to the other Muslim countries of the Middle East.

In foreign affairs, perception is often reality. The Turkish Armed Forces (and many in the Turkish establishment) perceive that they are in a battle with the AK Party to preserve the legacy of Atatürk, that the U.S. is the primary backer of the AK Party, and that the U.S. has been actively plotting to reduce their power and influence. Fundamentalist Muslims in Turkey (as elsewhere) perceive that the U.S. is in a fateful battle with Islam and that Iraq is only a beachhead in a much larger war. The Turkish people in general perceive that the U.S. is arrogant and unconcerned about Turkish interests, and that it supports an independent homeland for the Kurds in northern Iraq and even the terrorist PKK, either directly or indirectly.

How did we reach this point? First and foremost, I believe that high-level Turkish military officers and those aligned with them in the political and social spheres put two and two together in 2003-04 and came up with twenty-two instead of four. The occasion for this was the current President Bush's announcement of his ill-fated "Greater Middle East Initiative" in a speech before the National Endowment for Democracy in November 2003, the same month in which the generous offer by Turkey to provide 10,000 Turkish troops for the stabilization effort in Iraq was rejected by the Iraqi Governing Council. In fact, the President's speech took place on November 6, the day after the rejection by the Iraqi Governing Council and the day before Turkey withdrew its offer.

It is highly unlikely that the two events were seen as a mere coincidence by the Turkish General Staff. Still puzzled by the American failure to gain approval for joint military action in Iraq from the Turkish Parliament on March 1 of that year, still wondering why the U.S. would not allow a few more days for the military to arrange a new and positive vote on the issue, still chafing under American restrictions on Turkish troop movements in northern Iraq and Turkish military support for the Turkmen, and still angry over the treatment of Turkish soldiers by American troops in Sulaimaniya on July 4 of that year, the military clearly approved the offer of 10,000 troops, an offer solicited by the Americans in the first place. This was the ideal moment to erase the rancor of the preceding months and renew close Turkish-American military ties. The refusal of the Coalitional Provisional Authority to override Iraqi objections must have been seen as a deliberate affront by the Turkish military and final evidence that the U.S. simply did not want Turkish troops in the Coalition. Why not?

Again, many, if not most Turks believe that the answer lies in the President's announcement of his "Greater Middle East Initiative" –the apparent renewal of his father's mysterious "New World Order" that had been much speculated on in Turkey– which soon evolved into the "Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative." Suddenly, in the light of the grand conspiracy theories that fascinate and plague Turkey, a series of puzzles all seemed to have the same solution: Why do the Americans work against our military presence in Iraq? Why do they support Turkish membership in the EU so strongly, since that can only lessen American influence in Turkey? How did the AK Party rise to power so quickly? Why do the Americans treat Tayyip Erdoğan with such respect? Why did the Americans work so closely with the peshmerga when they invaded Iraq? Why do the Americans keep criticizing us in their annual report on religious freedom? And the answer to all these and other questions seemed to be: Aha! Turkey is to become a model of a moderate Islamic state so that the broader Middle East can be transformed into a region far more amenable to American interests, and this can only be accomplished by weakening the Turkish military and undermining the secular state through manipulation and support of the AK Party. The primary failing of this thesis, among many, is that it is totally false as well as demonstrably irrational.

The United States has not handled this situation well. We are not a nation consumed by conspiracy theories. Those that do exist, such as the belief that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the assassination of President Kennedy or that the U.S. itself arranged for the terror of 9/11 are credited only by tiny fringe elements in the country. As a result, our government does not respond as it should when we are the subject of such damaging fabrications overseas. (It is also true that the disastrous dismantling of the "U.S. Information Service" removed the government's best means of discrediting false charges against the country overseas.)

American officials have not treated the “moderate Islamic state” issue with the importance that it deserves. As a result, the U.S. government has not responded to it with seriousness, and many in the government are not even aware of it. This may change quickly now that the Chief Prosecutor of the Court of Appeals has actually referred to the Greater Middle East Initiative directly as a component of his charges against the AK Party: “After the 1990’s, moderate Islam and its political objective GMEP [“P” for “Project” instead of “Initiative”] were produced by central powers of globalization to be applied in our country and the region.”

With the “Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative” (BMENAI), what you see is what you get. There is nothing secret about it. All the documentation is public and unclassified. It was based on the UN’s “Arab Human Development Reports” of 2002 and 2003, in which the factors influencing poverty, unemployment, education, lack of democracy, and unequal treatment of women in the region were identified by Arab scholars themselves. The goals of BMENAI have been to improve the chances of the peaceful evolution of democracies by providing grants and expertise to enhance economic well-being, employment, higher education, democratic development, and equality of women throughout the region. The central foundation of the initiative is the belief that real democracies do not go to war against each other and that advancement of democracy and individual achievement in the region will serve everyone’s interests, except those of dictators and authoritarian leaders who prefer to keep their people powerless.

U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq clearly was assumed by many in Turkey to be part of GMEI or BMENAI even though there is absolutely no connection between the two. Action in Afghanistan was undertaken to strike back at Al-Qaida after 9/11 and destroy the base of operations provided to it by the totalitarian Taliban. Action in Iraq followed to forestall the possibility that Saddam might provide weapons of mass destruction to terrorists and to remove a ruthless dictator who had thumbed his nose at all of the provisions of the Ceasefire Agreement that ended the first Gulf War, subverted the “Oil for Food” program, provided safe-haven for known terrorists (including Abu Nidal and Abu Abbas), and tried on a daily basis to shoot down allied aircraft patrolling the northern and southern no-fly zones established after the first Gulf War.

Criticism of American military actions and strategies in Iraq can certainly be leveled fairly in Turkey as it is in the United States, but there is simply no tie-in to GMEI or BMENAI.

Perhaps most importantly, American policy toward Turkey as described in the “moderate Islam” conspiracy belief held by the Turkish military and voiced by the Chief Prosecutor of the Court of Appeals is the dead opposite of the actual policy. Turkey is important to the United States precisely because it is a

secular democracy in a nation with a Muslim-majority population. The U.S. has absolutely no interest in lessening the secular nature of the state. Turkey would then become just one more problematic Muslim country that has been unable to integrate Islam into modern democratic life. Turkey is important to the NATO precisely because it is a secular democracy that boasts a strong, modern military force, the second largest in the Alliance and because it can help the world avoid the threatened “conflict of civilizations.” Any diminution of Turkish military strength would weaken the Alliance and create problems for the U.S. and the other allies. The U.S. strongly supports Turkish membership in the EU in order to anchor Turkey once and for all in Europe –the great dream of Atatürk– and to prevent its cooption by or accommodation with militant Islam.

In fact, if the Iraqi experiment in democracy fails, democratic and secular Turkey will become the bulwark for both NATO and the West against an aggressive and potentially nuclear-armed Iran intent upon supporting terrorism and the advance of militant Islam. There is no conceivable strategic scenario that could provide any benefit to the United States in a militarily or politically weakened Turkey.

Moreover, any serious and rational belief in the “moderate Islam” scenario would have to explain how it would be possible for the U.S. to bring the AK Party to power and then to direct its actions. It is the sheer impossibility of doing such a thing from the American point of view that has led our diplomats to dismiss the scenario as unbelievable nonsense rather than attack it and expose the nonsense. Such a massive and counter-productive enterprise aimed at a NATO ally would require approvals and coordination with countless agencies and throughout all branches of the U.S government – approvals and coordination that would never materialize in the U.S. system. Not only would countless objections be raised for all the right reasons, but such a hare-brained scheme could never be kept secret in the U.S. government because of the sheer magnitude of it and the number of unhappy people who would have to be involved.

That is only the beginning, of course. Then a true believer would have to explain how the U.S. and its nefarious agents would be able to convince huge numbers of Turkish voters to support the party or to take control of the Turkish electoral system and rig the votes. Then such a believer would need to explain why the AK Party has taken so many actions that run counter to U.S. policies in the Middle East. And how would the introduction of Sharia in Turkey, a goal of the AK Party alleged by the Chief Prosecutor, in any way square with the scenario’s goal of establishing a moderate Islamic Republic in Turkey? Rational objections to the scenario pile on top of each other quickly and heavily as soon as anyone looks at it closely.

The other questions all have easy and truthful answers. For example, all American presidents meet periodically with foreign opposition leaders and regularly with prime ministers and heads of state. It was nothing out of the ordinary for President

Bush to meet with Tayyip Erdoğan before he secured his seat in the Parliament and became Prime Minister, because it was clear that as party leader he would soon become Prime Minister. American forces coordinated with peshmerga in the early stages of the Iraq conflict because the expected Turkish troops had been kept at home by the Turkish Parliament. The rejection of the resolution (tezkere) was a huge and bitter surprise to both militaries and both governments. The Iraqi Governing Council rejected the generous offer of 10,000 Turkish troops because of historical sensitivities and its worry over a serious clash between Turks and Kurds. (American coordination on this issue was inexcusably poor.) The U.S. has not moved militarily against the PKK because it lacks the ground troops necessary for such an operation and does not want to risk creating chaos among all the Kurds in the relatively peaceful northern Iraqi region. The current “actionable intelligence” arrangement with Turkey is certainly a healthy compromise.

There are undoubtedly many who have disseminated the conspiracy scenario who do not believe it themselves, particularly political party leaders who use it as an excuse for their own failures at the polls and unfortunately, some military leaders who are looking for excuses to depose the AK Party.

As the son of a career Army officer, a former Army officer myself, and a Viet Nam veteran, I hold the military profession in the highest esteem, and I have always admired the professionalism and dedication of the Turkish armed forces. Nevertheless, there is one glaring shortcoming with the Turkish military that must be resolved before Turkey can take its rightful place within the community of modern democratic nations: lack of civilian control. The Turkish military claims that Turkey is a special case, but in truth every country is a special case, and no other member of NATO and no other genuine modern democracy fails to observe the principle of civilian control of the military, precisely because genuine democracy cannot function under the threat of military coups.

The people of Turkey themselves must decide whether they will join the European Union and the first world of modern democracies by establishing true civilian control of the military or remain in the second world with an incomplete and guided democracy despite the extraordinary legacy of Atatürk and the former glories of the Ottoman Empire. It was Atatürk, of course, who challenged the status quo represented by the Sultan and the entrenched interests of his day and looked to support from Anatolia to establish the Republic and lead the new country into the modern world through a process of westernization. If he were alive today, it is difficult to believe that the great revolutionary would be a Kemalist defending the status quo and the power of the autocrats. Would he not again look to Anatolia to challenge the entrenched interests of today and the current Sultan in the form of his own deified image omnipresent in Turkey? Would he not firmly support Turkey’s membership in the European Union as the fulfillment of his life-long dream, and would he not insist, as others have, that the basic cure for the problems of democracy is more democracy, not suspension of democracy?

It is painful for an outsider who loves the country to watch it struggle against itself, and worst of all to see the struggle conducted under false pretenses. There is no American plot to convert Turkey into a “moderate Islamic state,” just as there is no justification for a judicial coup that could remove a government duly elected by the Turkish people so that the Turkish military can continue to run the country behind the scenes in support of tired and ineffectual politicians who care more about their personal wealth and influence than the good of the country. (One of the long-standing problems in Turkish political life has been the lack of democracy within the political parties, as well as the peculiar habit of party leaders remaining at the helm regardless of failure in elections, often for life.)

Apart from civilian control of the military, the most pressing structural problem in Turkish democracy is the lack of a truly independent judiciary. Too many judges, both at low and high levels, believe that they owe their loyalties to those who appointed them, rather than to the nation, mirroring the situation in the political parties. Too many are both ideologically indoctrinated and vulnerable to political pressure, particularly if it comes from the security or military sectors. All of this has become entwined with the false “moderate Islam” conspiracy cited by the Chief Prosecutor, as the opponents of real democracy in Turkey –and the genuine conspirators– try to pressure the Constitutional Court into removing the upstart AK Party from power in order to avoid showing their real colors in a military coup, which would devastate the economy and set Turkey back in international circles for decades.

The problem for the genuine conspirators in Turkey today is that all of this is totally transparent. The Turkish population today has become better educated and more sophisticated than in the periods of past coups. The man on the street today knows full well how the political forces are aligned and what is at stake in the case of a judicial coup – and, he probably supports the AK Party, as evidenced by the most recent election results. He may believe that the U.S. is trying somehow to encourage moderate Islam in Turkey and resent the alleged meddling in Turkish politics, since that is what he has heard so often, but he also probably believes that there is nothing inherently wrong with “moderate Islam”, since he views himself as a moderate Muslim. He does not believe that Shariah is on the way, nor would he want it to be. He respects the Turkish military, but he rejects the prospect of a coup and he sees no reason for one. He is pleased with his country’s economic performance and direction, and the last thing he wants is political instability, which he knows all too well from the past will only bring bad times upon his head again.

In short, the anti-democratic conspirators do not have the people with them, and they know it. The United States fought a terrible and bloody civil war so that, in President Lincoln’s words in the Gettysburg Address, “. . . that government

of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Turkey should avoid civil conflict and reject coups of any kind for exactly the same reason.

The separation of church/mosque and state is the basic founding principle of the United States – the very reason that the first settlers arrived in the New World. That principle demands both that religion stay out of government and government stay out of religion. It is and must be a two-way street. Those who are unable to accept this basic tenet of modern democracy should face the people directly with their one-sided belief and accept the verdict of the voters, rather than invent and disseminate patently false conspiracy scenarios and hide behind them as they attempt to overturn the will of the voters. The United States supports Turkish democracy – period. It does not support any single political party or any single political leader – period. The United States has tried and always will try to work closely with whatever government is freely and fairly elected by the Turkish people.

It is more than fitting to close with the words of Atatürk: “You must never forget that our strength, for today and tomorrow, is to be the soul of integrity, to be trustworthy, open in our dealings with all men and faithful to our promises.” Do those who describe themselves with Atatürk’s given name apply those words as they burrow beneath the surface into the foundations of Turkish democracy? Will they close their eyes to them as they and the country stumble into the 21st century, rather than striding forward with Atatürk’s brilliant vision of westernization and genuine democracy as their guiding light?