

Why We Are Losing Turkey

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With the steady decline of our selected ally Gen. Pervez Musharraf's ability to govern Pakistan and the growing alienation of the Turkish people and government from their longtime ally the United States, it is fair to say that from the Bosphorus to the Himalayas, American interests continue to decline, while American policy drifts. It is ironic, if not mordant, to observe that in that zone, our policy in Iraq stands out as holding more promise for success than most of the other policies we are attempting. This week, let me consider why we are losing Turkey.

The unfolding estrangement of the Turkish people (and derivatively, the Turkish government) had been predicted and virtually unnoticed by Washington until last week. This tragic event needs to be understood thoroughly by the United States and the West because it goes to the core of our theory of how to defeat radical Islam.

About three years ago, as then-editorial page editor of The Washington Times, I hired a leading Turkish correspondent in Washington, Tulin Daloglu. She was -- and is -- a superb student of Turkish culture and politics, a secularist, a friend and admirer of America and a Turkish patriot. I asked her to describe in her column each week what the Turkish people and government were thinking, particularly about American policies and actions. I thought more attention both in Congress and the administration was needed on Turkish attitudes and American-Turkish policy.

I was deeply concerned that Turkish attitudes were slipping dangerously away from us, despite Turkey being our strongest Muslim ally in the Middle East and the model for how Israel and the West could establish a modus vivendi with a major Muslim country. Turkey has been both taken for granted and ignored by Washington for years.

In Congress, the well-organized Greek- and Armenian-American communities had a stronger voice than the Turkish-American community. And, of course, for historic reasons, Greek-Americans and Armenian-Americans usually oppose various Turkish policies. The administration's peevement with Turkey for not permitting our 4th Armored Division to enter Iraq through Turkey in 2003 led to a failure to attend carefully to a decaying relationship with our great ally. For about two years, the State Department barely communicated in a significant way -- on a policy basis -- with Turkey.

To read Daloglu's columns in The Washington Times these past years is to read week by week the sad, objective chronicle of the loss of a vital ally.

In the past week, the Turks' reaction to the congressional Armenian genocide resolution

and their threat of serious military action against our allies the Iraqi Kurds finally has -- too late -- gotten Washington's attention. But beyond the appalling mess we have if Turkey invades Iraq (under the U.N. resolutions, we are, arguably, obliged to defend the Kurds from the Turks -- militarily), there is a larger and still-ignored lesson to be learned by the meltdown in support we have received from the Turkish people.

If there is one idea that Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, share on how to fight the war on terror, it is that we need to reach out to and win the hearts and minds of the moderate, modern, peaceable, more secularist Muslims and empower them to defeat by both persuasion and other methods the radical, violent fundamentalists in their religion.

That would be a very, very good idea. But consider the Turkish experience in the past six years. The Turks are the moderate, modern, peaceable, more secularist Muslims. Moreover our countries have been close allies for a half-century. And Turkey has had extensive friendly commercial relations with Israel. They are Turks, not Arabs, and are therefore less susceptible to the emotional plight of the West Bank Arabs under Israeli occupation.

And yet we have lost the Turks almost as badly as we have lost the angriest fundamentalist Arab Muslims. If we can't keep a fair share of their friendly attitude, how do we expect to win the much vaunted and awaited hearts and minds campaign?

While I hardly have the answer to that question, one lesson can be learned from the Turkish debacle (or near debacle): While we cozied up to their arch threat -- the Iraqi Kurds -- we kept telling them not to worry and to trust us. We did little to allay their fears that the Iraqi Kurds were giving the PKK terrorists succor and sanctuary in Iraq. We didn't pressure our allies the Iraqi Kurds to pressure the PKK. In the future, we are going to have to earn each ounce of friendly relations based on what we actually do for the object of our desire. Good intentions and common visions of the future are not likely to be readily available.

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