The U.S. and Turkey in 2010
Robert P. Finn

The views expressed in this and all LISD commentaries are solely those of the authors.

Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world is still in the process of adjustment to a change which challenged the parameters of power and equilibrium that had uneasily governed the world for half a century. While the dissolution of the Soviet Union came as a welcome surprise to many, it also brought many questions and problems that have presented challenges on all sides. For Turkey, as Foreign Minister Davutoğlu pointed out in his book, it meant that the constraints of defense and national security which definitively placed Turkey in the western camp had become relaxed. The Iron Curtain which had separated the Turks of Turkey from their cousins all across Asia was lifted and an emotional reunion of the Turkic people took place.

It was also a time when Turkey and the U.S. were close. I was privileged to open the U.S. Embassy in Baku in the spring of 1992 and spoke on Azeri television in Turkish at the opening. Many Azeris told me they knew that they were truly independent when they saw the American speaking to them in their own language after 160 plus years of Russian occupation. I actually typed our first dispatches from Baku on a Turkish typewriter borrowed from the next-door Turkish embassy. As the Communist government fell and a new democratic government came in, the two embassies worked about as closely as two embassies can toward common goals.

In the months that followed, Turkey, under the leadership of Turgut Özal, reached out to the Turkic republics of Central Asia. One of his last acts before he passed away in the spring of 1993 was to pay a visit to Baku, where the promise of oil riches and nascent democracy was entwined with the satisfaction of a family reunion. “One nation-two states” is still used to describe the relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey. The United States was closely involved in developing the energy relations between them, and the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline stands as a testimony to this successful effort. The expansion from NATO security partners to business associates was a positive indicator for a new set of relations, a seemingly seamless transition from the cold war to a new period of peace.

The Turkish-United States relationship, however, has never been as smooth and seamless as some contemporary observers would have it. Dating back to the 1960s, there were incidents of anti-US and anti-NATO activity along with enormous affection for the US. The US ambassador’s car was burned at Middle East Technical University in 1969. Nationwide strikes forced the removal of the Peace Corps from Turkey in 1970. The Johnson letter over Cyprus led to a US military embargo and chilled relations over several years in the 1970s. At the same time, thousands of NATO personnel and their families, most of them American, were contentedly living and working in Turkey. Numerous Turks went to the US for education and training. I taught some of them English as a Peace Corps teacher in Ankara. During the years of the cold War, Turks knew very well that it was the umbrella of NATO that protected them. In spite of many problems, the common goals and common danger created an alliance that has lasted for about sixty years.
Now however, the situation has changed and Turkey has changed. A country that was poor is now booming, with one of the highest growth rates in the world. The global financial collapse of 2008 affected Turkey less than others, and Turkey is expanding its market strategies to Africa and South America as well as the United States. Speaking at the United Nations the week before last, President Gül presented a strong portrait of a Turkey that is activist, forward moving and steady on its own two feet. He stressed Turkey’s importance as a regional player, a presence in the Moslem world and an arbiter in problems such as the Iranian nuclear issue. On this subject, for example, Gül pointed out that U.S. and Turkish goals do not differ, and one may argue indeed that it is question of modalities. The U.S. can be the bad cop towards Iran and Turkey can be the good cop, but the goal is the same. However, there are a number of questions in Washington as to where Turkey actually is going. President Gül’s failure to meet with Israeli President Peres at the UN while meeting with Iran’s President Ahmedinejad, for whatever reasons, underlined these concerns.

The present difficulties in the relationship go back several years. The Turkish Parliament’s refusal to permit US forces to transit Turkey on the way to the Iraq war still gets mentioned when one talks about Turkey in Washington. Former Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld stated that the action had cost many American lives. Considering that the main supporter of Turkey in the U.S. has been the military establishment for many decades, it was a decision, however democratically taken, that has had a long-lasting impact on bilateral relations. Turkey provides extensive support for the effort in Iraq in many ways, and is a major military presence in Afghanistan, but the U.S. public remembers mainly the troop decision.

Similarly, the Mavi Marmara incident last summer coupled with Hamas visits to Turkey has raised questions about where Turkey is going, even though the blockade of Gaza had been condemned by many, including senior U.S. officials. The media in the US is largely pro-Israeli, so even the worldwide condemnation of Israeli actions was muted in the U.S. media. The emotional rhetoric and saber rattling over the incident had a cooling effect on groups in the U.S. who typically strongly support Turkey.

Public diplomacy is an important weapon in politics and international relations, and media are a critical element. Anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli programs on Turkish media have done much to change Turkish opinion about those two countries, and this information is known to policymakers in Washington. To give you a very minor example: in August I was watching a TRT news report on the forest fires in Russia. After showing the fires, etc, the announcer said “Scientists say the fires are caused by climatic change caused by the United States.” “What?” You will say. That’s what I said, but the damage is done.

Turkey’s growing popularity in the Middle East street is another phenomenon that has people in Washington asking questions. If Turkey is the example of secular democracy that many in Washington believe it is, Turkey can be an enlightening influence in an area that is short on democracy and weak on secularism. If Turkey is itself troubled on secularism and mistaking populism for democracy, then there are problems.
Commentary in the U.S. on the recent Turkish referendum generally praised the success of the referendum for moving Turkey closer to EU norms, as did the EU itself. However, Turkey must guard against tendencies towards autocracy and the waning of democracy within parties as a part of the democratic community. One sees this concern expressed more and more in the U.S.

The AKP originally was seen as a bright answer to Turkey’s problems. Economically, it is still. The party organized well, took care of the poor, and provided a political voice for the newly urbanizing. Its efforts to limit the powers of the military were seen as in keeping with Turkey’s European and democratic vocation. Western media adopted them as heroes of a social revolution, labeling their opponents the “secular elite” of judges and military, forgetting that nearly thirty percent of the population consistently votes left of center. The voting map from the September referendum shows where the divisions in Turkey more clearly lie, with the Western and coastal areas generally opposed to the referendum changes and other parts of the country more in favor. What emerges, as people in Washington are beginning to realize, is a country with substantial differences of opinion across the board. What is needed in the political conversation, as it is in Washington to an increasing extent, is more healthy respect for the other side, which is one of the prerequisites of democracy.

The imbalance in the U.S. perception of Turkey comes, to a certain extent, from the past. Turkey’s left of center parties have always been cozier with European socialists than American democrats, for lots of good reasons, but this has led to a little distance that perhaps should not have been there. It also comes from the disfunctionality of parties where the leader is totally in charge. This has been the affliction of Turkish politics for many years. The CHP now has a new leader, and it will be interesting to see how that party develops, and whether Mr. Baykal will come back into power.

The United States has been and will continue to be a strong supporter of Turkey’s candidacy for the European Union. For this reason, it has strongly supported the reforms that bring Turkey closer to that goal. A democratic secular Turkey with a vibrant economy would be a rich prize for the EU. However, many EU countries, for a wide variety of reasons I will not go into here, are reluctant or openly resistant to bringing in Turkey. They must deal with their own problems about Turkey and the nature of the EU before Turkey joins. In any event, Turkey is doing just fine on its own.

In September, Turkey sponsored a Conference of Turkic Nations that hopes to bring the Turkic-speaking countries closer economically, politically and culturally. This is an opportunity for Turkey to regain the impetus it had in the early years after the end of the Soviet Union when it perhaps pushed too hard and too soon with its cousins. The U.S. could partner with Turkey to develop economic and political ties in this critically important region which will play a major role in this century. Energy and transit links from Turkey through Central Asia could reach to China and the Subcontinent.

In the more immediate region, Turkey has been quite active. The “no problems with our neighbors” policy has obviously run into some difficulty, but there have been ups and downs in Turkey’s relations with Israel and others in the region before. The important thing is to keep sight of the long-term goals that determine relations between nations. It is here that some in Washington have concerns about Turkey, and particularly, Islamist tendencies in the government.
After the Mavi Marmara incident, there were reports in the Turkish press showing that most bi-lateral deals were still going forward, but Israeli tourists were hard to find in Turkey this year. There were, on the other hand, lots of reports of Arab tourists, lured mainly by fleshy Turkish TV serials that were roundly condemned by the Islamic clergy in their home countries and devotedly watched by the populace. And this is another side of Turkey that they don’t know about in Washington, where they think it’s all like Saudi Arabia. Another area for public diplomacy, for Turkey to let Americans know what Turkey is really like. And TV popularity is not political power.

Turkey’s improved relations with Iran have also caused concern for many in the West. Turkey shares the goal of having Iran nuclear-free, but the diplomacy in which it and Brazil engaged not only did not solve the problem but complicated it. Turkey’s vote against sanctions in the UN further rubbed things the wrong way. People in Washington did not understand why Turkey did not simply abstain. Turkey is also closely tied to Iran over energy issues, obtaining a significant share of its gas from Iran and stands in line to partner with Iran in significant energy deals when sanctions are lifted. Turkey has made it clear that it abides by the UN sanctions on Iran, but has resisted US pressure for even tougher unilateral sanctions. Here is another example where the two allies are taking separate paths. The cross-border trade with Iran is lucrative, and for eastern Turkey vital, but provides some release for Iran as well. Turkey’s response to complaints is that Europeans get around the sanctions anyway through shadow firms. This does not assuage Turkey watchers in Washington.

Turkey’s booming relationship with Russia has not escaped the American eye. Russia is now Turkey’s largest trading partner and Turkey is tied to Russia by energy lines, as well as trade. Some have asked about the possible consequences of a Russian model for Turkey. Turkey and Russia are both interested in the Caucasus, with historic ties to the countries there. The U.S. has encouraged Turkey to open the border with Armenia, and the Turkish leadership has made moves in this direction, but the complicated relations and public opinion in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey have so far prevented this from happening. The Armenian lobby in the U.S., one of the most active, contains to work against Turkey on this and other issues.

The September referendum victory in Turkey has been taken as an indicator by most that AKP will win again in 2011 and perhaps in the presidential election in 2012. It’s very early to call these things, as the impressive Turkish economic model may not hold through until then, but I’ll leave that for the business people to decide. There are other problems as well which may alter public feeling towards the government. The celebrated openings of the Turkish administration have not succeeded in popular opinion, as witnessed by the boycott of the referendum in Kurdish areas. The opening to the Alevi has not so far resulted in significant alteration or even recognition of their status as a separate confessional group. All of these issues may trouble the Turkish administration as it moves towards elections.

The position of many in Turkey is that the world has changed, Turkey in particular has changed, and others better get used to it. They think the US has not adjusted to the new reality. On the U.S. side, many are wondering if the Turks know what they’re up to, and if they do, what it is. There are increasing concerns about questions of religiosity and tolerance, at a time when nega-
tive feelings towards Islam are rising in many places. Frankly, many in Washington are puzzled by Turkey in spite of assurances from the Turkish government. They think Turkey’s unique example needs to be strengthened and demonstrated. They feel, as Mevlana said “Göründüğün gibi ol, yahut olduğun gibi görün.” Either seem what you are, or be what you seem. Turkey’s many friends in Washington want to work with Turkey as a vibrant economic partner, based on a clear vision and determined commitments to shared basic principles. Turkey needs to make it clear that it feels the same way.