

Turkish foreign policy moving away from US position

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The moderate Islamist government in power in Turkey is steering the country away from a pro-US foreign policy and is rapidly orienting itself with its Muslim neighbors, a regional expert said during testimony before a congressional committee September 14.

Soner Cagaptay, a fellow at the conservative-leaning Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said that ever since the Justice and Development Party (AKP in Turkish), took power in 2002, Ankara has viewed foreign policy issues increasingly through the prism of religion.

Cagaptay spoke at a congressional hearing under the topic *"Is There a Clash of Civilizations?: Islam, Democracy, and US-Middle East Policy."* He argued that while Turkey before 2002 could have been used as a strong example to debunk the notions of a "clash of civilizations" between the Muslim and western worlds, that is no longer the case.

Once steadfast allies, the United States and Turkey have experienced bilateral tension in recent years, mainly connected with the Iraq invasion and the subsequent imbroglio. The Bush administration became enraged with the AKP government on the eve of the US-led blitz against Iraq in 2003, when Turkey declined to grant temporary basing rights to US troops. Domestically, the AKP has been facing growing pressure from nationalist constituencies.

"Today ... US-Turkish relations are strained on almost all Middle East issues. From their views of terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah to dealing with Iran and Syria, the United States and Turkey have developed vastly disparate positions since the AKP came to power," Cagaptay said.

The rapprochement with Turkey's Muslim neighbors has gone both ways. Iran has tried to gain favor lately with Ankara by adopting a tough stand against Kurdish militants affiliated with the PKK, who are active in the mountainous area that connects southeastern Turkey with Iran and Iraq. At the same time, Ankara and Tehran remain divided over energy issues.

In August, Washington took a step towards mollifying Turkey by appointing **Joseph Ralston**, a retired four-star general, as a special envoy with responsibility for *"coordinating US engagement with the government of Turkey and the government of Iraq to eliminate the terrorist threat of the PKK and other terrorist groups operating in northern Iraq and across the Turkey-Iraq border,"* according to a State Department statement.

Cagaptay said the strategy of the AKP to orient its foreign policy toward its Muslim neighbors is meant, at least in part, as a political strategy. *"If the Turks think of themselves as Muslims first in the foreign-policy arena, then one day they'll think of themselves as Muslims first in the domestic one,"* Cagaptay said.

He noted that the Turkish public tends to follow its rulers' lead: A recent survey showed that only 12 percent of Turks viewed the United States positively, down from 52 percent in 2000.

Editor's Note: Joshua Kucera is a Washington, DC,-based freelance writer who specializes in security issues in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East.