



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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The Brookings Institution's Turkey 2007 Project

## “Back to the Future: US-Turkish Relations after the Bush Presidency”

**Ambassador Mark Parris**, Visiting Fellow

**Ambassador (ret.) Gunduz Aktan**, Member of Turkish Parliament, National Movement Party (MHP)

**Dr. Emre Gonensay**, Former Foreign Minister of Turkey

**Dr. Suat Kiniklioglu**, Member of Turkish Parliament, Justice and Development Party (AKP)

Service Employees' International Union Building  
1800 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC  
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The Brookings Institution hosted a wide-ranging discussion on **the current state of US-Turkish relations and on what to look for in the years to come**. **Ambassador Mark Parris** moderated the discussion, posing a series of questions to retired **Ambassador Gunduz Aktan**, **Dr. Emre Gonensay**, and **Dr. Suat Kiniklioglu**, who are among the leading voices in Turkish foreign policymaking.

Parris began his remarks by noting the **improvements in US-Turkish relations that have taken place in the past three months**. Cooperation on countering the **threat posed by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)** has raised the standing of the US among the Turkish people, with the US recently registering an approval rating above 30%, a significant improvement from a low of 9% during the summer of 2007. **The past five years have represented the lowest point in relations** between the two allies in a generation. **What did each side do wrong, and what did it do right?**

Gonensay suggested that **Iraq is the focal point, and he opined that Turkey should've allowed American troops to invade Iraq in 2003 from Turkish territory**, a move Turkey's parliament rejected at the time. **Kiniklioglu disagreed with this view**, wondering aloud about what might've occurred had Turkey participated in the invasion. He did suggest, however, that the recent success of the American surge of forces and the apparent weakening of the PKK has left him slightly **optimistic about Iraq**. And he noted that Turkey's foreign policy has changed as a result of structural forces. **Turkey has transitioned from being a Cold War satellite of the West to a regional power**, and **Turkish public opinion now influences its foreign policy** more than it did in the past.

Looking ahead at how bilateral relations are likely to evolve, Aktan asserted that “both convergent and divergent paths are possible.” Kiniklioglu said **Turkey and the US can work together on Turkey’s EU accession and on a security agenda vis-à-vis Iran and Russia**, though the two allies currently disagree over the wisdom of isolating or engaging with Syria.

A discussion on **energy** pointed to the importance of **Russia**, which now controls most of the resources in the Caspian and Central Asian regions. Kiniklioglu suggested that what Turkey needs is energy diversification, given that it receives 65% of its gas from Russian sources.

As talk turned to **domestic developments in Turkey**, Aktan warned about **three possible near-term crises**: first, a **constitutional crisis** as the governing party, AKP, attempts to usher in a new constitution, a move Turkey’s secularists oppose; second, an **economic crisis** that could hit Turkey following the current economic troubles plaguing the US and Europe; and third, a **crisis over the PKK**, should the group launch a large-scale bombing campaign. He asserted that these domestic crises could lead a desperate **AKP**, which has an Islamist pedigree, to shore up its support by conducting a more **religiously-based foreign policy**. Kiniklioglu, of the AKP, strongly disagreed with this notion, stating that AKP conducts its foreign policy on the basis of Turkey’s national interests.

Parris asked the panelists to offer **advice to the incoming US administration**. All three echoed Aktan’s suggestions to **consult Turkey more when making policy toward the Middle East** and to do everything possible to **forestall a referendum on the Iraqi city of Kirkuk**, which would create real problems for Turkey. Gonensay added that the **US should avoid giving advice on Turkey’s constitutional reform**. Turning to the US Congress, all of the panelists agreed that **HR 106 (which labels as genocide the mass killings of Armenians around 1915) should be prevented from coming to a vote**. Aktan opined that the matter should be settled not by legislation or historical commissions, but rather through legal adjudication or arbitration.

The question-and-answer period began with the topic of Iran. Kiniklioglu argued for a policy more based on engagement than confrontation. Aktan, a member of the nationalist opposition party that has joined with the ruling AKP to **lift the ban on women wearing headscarves in universities**, said that it was **important to resolve this issue so that the country could focus on “life and death issues,” like the threat posed by PKK terrorism**. On Turkey’s bid to join the EU, Kiniklioglu said that **2007 was a lost year for the talks**, but that **the government is crafting a communications strategy to reignite support for moving forward with discussions**, not only in EU states but also among an increasingly skeptical Turkish public. He suggested that **Article 301**, the notorious measure that criminalizes insults to “Turkishness,” **would be repealed**. Aktan said the **EU was camouflaging its anti-Muslim prejudice with critiques of Turkey’s policies**, such as Turkey’s position on Cyprus and on its refusal so far to repeal Article 301. Asked about the state of Turkey’s democracy, Kiniklioglu asserted that the **July 22, 2007 parliamentary elections that returned the AKP to power were a “turning point,”** marking Turkey’s deepening commitment to transparency and democracy. And on **Israel-Palestine**, Kiniklioglu stated that **Turkey is increasingly seen as a neutral arbiter in the region**, given its good relations with the Palestinians, Israelis, Syrians, Saudis, and Iranians.