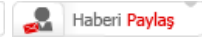


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Turkish Daily News

## Problems of perception and vision: Turkey and the U.S



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DAVID ARNETT

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: 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.

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 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 *raison 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.

News of the now notorious Suleimaniyeh 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. 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 reenactment of the "bagging" incident in Suleimaniyeh. Boasting the largest budget in Turkish film history, \$10 million, the film was funded in part by one of the newspapers that first broke the story on the events in Suleymaniye.

During roughly the same period, the initial enthusiasm for 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.

### The thesis of a moderate Islamic state

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 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 Sulaimaniyeh 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?

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: 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.

	Haberler Anında Cebinizde	Hürriyet Mobil
	Haberler Anında Bilgisayarınızda	Haber Alarmı
	Haber Kaçırma Son	Hürriyet Mind
	Sitene Haber Ekle Kazan	Bumerang

All the documentation in regard to the "Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative" is public and unclassified. 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. U.S. military action against Afghanistan and Iraq clearly was assumed by many in Turkey to be part of GMEI or BMENAI, even though there is no connection at all. 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.

Perhaps most importantly, American policy toward Turkey as described in the "moderate Islam" conspiracy belief held by the Turkish military and voiced recently by the Chief Prosecutor of the Court of Appeals in his case against the AK Party 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 NATO precisely because it is a *secular* democracy that boasts a strong, modern military force and can help the world avoid the threatened "conflict of civilizations." 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.

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 direct its actions. Then a true believer would have to explain how the U.S. would be able to convince huge numbers of Turkish voters to support the party. 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?

### The man on the street

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 its 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.

There is no conceivable strategic scenario that could provide any benefit to the United States in a militarily or politically weakened Turkey. 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. That is the simple truth, regardless of conspiracy theories or perceptions to the contrary.

(David Arnett is the former U.S. Consul General in Istanbul. This article was published in the Spring edition of the Turkish Policy Quarterly.)

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