

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: *Who Lost Turkey?*

IMAGINE THE FOLLOWING scene at a possible presidential debate focusing on foreign policy, in the late fall of 2012. The moderator, Jim Lehrer, poses the question:

For over fifty years, the Republic of Turkey was a staunch American ally and important partner in the Middle East. But over the past several years it has decisively distanced itself from the West. A few years ago the Turkish military overthrew the elected Islamist-leaning government, which it accused of promoting a hidden Islamic fundamentalist agenda and selling out Turkey's national interests. In response to U.S. and European sanctions, the new military regime angrily declared that it would pursue a more independent foreign policy. It withdrew its application to join the European Union, suspended its membership in NATO, and barred the United States from using military bases in Turkey to transit equipment to Iraq. It has developed closer diplomatic, economic, and energy relations with Russia, China, and Iran, and has sent Turkish forces into northern

Iraq to act against the Kurds. How could the United States let this happen to our relationship with such an important American ally? As president what would you have done to prevent this foreign policy disaster? Who lost Turkey? And how can we win it back?

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Of course, such a scenario may not take place in 2012—or ever, for that matter. But anyone who dismisses such a possibility has not been paying attention, and anybody not thinking now about how to avoid such a scenario risks failing to do what is necessary to prevent it. Indeed, a series of major political and strategic factors are now converging to raise questions about the future of Turkey's long-standing Western and democratic orientation. Turkey's relationship with the United States is deeply strained, and anti-Americanism has surged; one 2008 poll showed that Turkey had the least positive view of the United States of any country in the world.¹ Turkey's hopes of joining the European Union, which were high as recently as the EU's October 2005 decision to begin accession negotiations, have also been deflated—a majority of Turks now doubt whether Turkey will ever get in. Add to the mix a Turkish society deeply polarized along secular and religious lines, the revival of terrorist attacks by the separatist Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan—PKK), growing Western support for official recognition that the Turks perpetrated a genocide against the Armenians in the early twentieth century, and deep resentment in Turkey that the West has not delivered on its promise to ease the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots and you have the makings of a severe Turkish backlash against the West.

Given Turkey's overwhelmingly Muslim population and consecutive election victories by a political party with Islamic roots,

many equate the notion of “losing Turkey” with the idea of an Islamic revival. In fact, however, although the growing importance of religion in Turkey is having a major impact on Turkish society, the threat to Turkey’s Western orientation today is not so much Islamization but growing nationalism and frustration with the United States and Europe. A majority of Turks still want to see their country firmly anchored in the West, but their patience is wearing thin because of what they perceive to be Western double standards and neglect of Turkish national security interests.

Furthermore, in an ironic twist, the principal challenge to Turkey’s Western orientation is coming not from Islamist politicians but from the secularist establishment that has long had close ties to the West. Turkey’s Kemalist establishment (named for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey) and its supporters believe the government of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi—AKP) under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is pursuing a hidden Islamic agenda and blame the United States and Europe for supporting it. The degree of alarm among Turkish secularists is underestimated by foreign observers, who tend to see “moderate Islam” as a positive alternative to Muslim fundamentalism—an alternative to the “clash of civilizations”—in the post-9/11 world. Yet Western praise of Turkey as a “moderate Islamic country” only exacerbates the fears and concerns of Turkish secularists, who do not want their country to be an experiment in “moderate Islamization.” The Kemalists also believe the AKP government is too soft on Kurdish separatists, again pursuing a dangerous policy encouraged and abetted by the United States. In other words, concerning the two greatest perceived threats to Turkey in the eyes of the Kemalist establishment—Islamism and the Kurdish question—the AKP and the West are seen to be on the wrong side. These

dynamics have already created a chasm between Kemalism and the West. And they have realigned the traditional foreign policy orientations of Turkey's major domestic groups: the once Eastern-oriented Islamists are now the ones more interested in maintaining close ties with Europe and the United States, whereas the once Western-oriented Kemalist elites are questioning the value of close Turkish ties with the West.

In the past, Americans and Europeans would often ask whether Turkey had any realistic geopolitical alternatives to allying itself with the West and complacently reassured themselves that it did not. But today such alternatives are starting to look more realistic to many Turks. If the strategic relationship with the United States continues to erode and prospects for joining the EU continue to recede, Turkey could opt for a more nationalistic and authoritarian path, perhaps combining a version of isolationism with closer relations with sometime rivals of the United States such as Russia, Iran, China, and Syria. Americans and Europeans who do not take the risk of such a development seriously underestimate the degree of resentment of the West that has been building up in the country.

Turkish politicians and officials, it should be made clear—including the current Justice and Development Party (AKP) government under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan—are committed to maintaining Turkey's Western and democratic orientation. In early 2008, moreover, Turkish feelings about the United States improved, at least temporarily, following Washington's agreement to support Turkish military action against the PKK in Iraq. At the same time, however, both external and internal factors are still pushing Turkey in the opposite direction. Ongoing uncertainty about the war in Iraq, increased Kurdish terrorism, new obstacles to EU accession, and developments in Cyprus and Armenia are leading some Turks to question the value

of their long-standing geopolitical alignments. Domestically, the intense polarization between the AKP and the secularist establishment does not bode well for Turkish democracy.

The stakes for the United States and Europe in Turkey's future are high. Home to more than 70 million Muslims, Turkey is, for all its problems, the most advanced democracy in the Islamic world. It has borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It has a rapidly growing economy and an annual GDP of nearly \$700 billion, making it one of the twenty largest economies in the world. It is the corridor through which the vast energy reserves of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia will pass to the West—the only alternative being Iran. A stable, Western-oriented, liberal Turkey on a clear path toward EU membership would serve as a growing market for Western goods, a contributor of the labor forces Europe will desperately need, a democratic example for the rest of the Muslim world, a stabilizing influence on Iraq, a partner in Afghanistan, and a critical ally in the war on terrorism—not a bad list of attributes. A resentful, unstable, and inward-looking Turkey, on the other hand, would be the opposite in every case; if its domestic politics went wrong it could not only cease being a close friend but could become an actual adversary of the West. None of this means that the United States or its European allies should craft their policies on the sole basis of satisfying Turkish nationalism; Turkey is a difficult and sometimes insecure partner whose demands are often hard to satisfy. It does, however, mean that it would be folly to ignore the consequences of actions that have such an important impact on this strategically critical state.

Given these stakes and implications, Western leaders should be doing all they can so that we do not need to have a debate—in four years, or ever—about “who lost Turkey.” To that end, leaders

in the United States, Europe, and Turkey should be asking themselves what they could do now to avoid the scenario outlined earlier. We propose five main steps:

—Promotion of a “grand bargain” between Turkey and the Kurds

—Western support for liberalism and democracy in Turkey

—A renewed commitment by the European Union and Turkey to support eventual Turkish membership

—Promotion of a historic compromise with Armenia

—Support for a political settlement in Cyprus and greater Western engagement with Turkish Cypriots

Such achievable steps (fleshed out in the final chapter) are not only worthy goals on their own merits, but they could also go a long way toward preventing an unnecessary, damaging, and potentially permanent split between Turkey and the West. Turkey need not be “lost” to the West, but it will be, unless there is concerted action from the United States, Europe, and, most important, Turkey itself.