

## Analysis

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**Summary:** Turbulence in U.S.-Turkey relations should be expected in the short-term and ignored only at both countries' peril. The information contained in the WikiLeaks release causing this latest storm have centered on unflattering portrayals of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, but Ankara and Washington seem to be publicly downplaying tensions. The silver lining from the WikiLeaks release is that, like it or not, all of Washington's cards are publicly on the table with Ankara.

## After WikiLeaks, U.S.-Turkish Relations in Need of Catharsis not Recriminations

by Joshua W. Walker

Relations between the United States and Turkey have always been dynamic and reflective of the moment. As the release of classified U.S. government cables by WikiLeaks has most recently demonstrated, turbulence in U.S.-Turkey relations should be expected in the short-term and ignored only at both countries' peril. The readjustments in the half-century old U.S.-Turkish alliance chronicled through the U.S. State Department documents leaked thus far are critical for the long-term health for one of the transatlantic communities most dynamic and important partnerships, particularly at this moment as they have reached a tipping point. U.S. diplomats' skepticism about Turkey's dependability as a transatlantic partner and warnings about the leadership in Ankara should be taken seriously, but it would be foolish to write-off the strategic role that Turkey has played and continues to play in a critically important region. If U.S.-Turkish relations are going to weather this latest storm, they will need to involve sustained political leadership on both sides of the Atlantic and a cooperative approach to adapting this historic alliance to the needs of a new Turkey and a transformed America.

The [information](#) contained in the leaks have centered on unflattering portrayals of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as being an authoritarian and a corrupt

Islamist, surrounded by a closeted Muslim fraternity of advisors, and worshiped as the Sultan or "[Tribune of Anatolia](#)." Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is similarly described as a dangerous "neo-Ottomanist" Muslim philosopher who has little to no understanding of politics beyond Ankara. Unfortunately, these latest revelations come at precisely the worst possible time in U.S.-Turkish relations, which are already reeling from a deficit of trust and severe differences in approach, strategy, and tone on everything from Iran and Israel to NATO missile defense. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's first meeting after the release was with Davutoğlu, who pointedly welcomed a WikiLeaks release of Ankara's material as a chance to show that Turkish foreign policy does not engage in "double-speak." Erdoğan, meanwhile, shrugged off most of the cables, but reacted strongly to personal accusations of corruption involving alleged Swiss bank accounts, over which he threatened to sue former U.S. diplomats. The political points scored by Erdoğan and Davutoğlu over an apologetic and embarrassed Washington have registered with their Anatolian conservative constituencies, which are now lashing out at their opposition both domestically and internationally.

With the WikiLeaks release as a new backdrop to the already contentious debates about Turkey's place in the transatlantic



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partnership in the headlines less than two weeks ago at the Lisbon Summit, Ankara and Washington seem to be publicly down-playing tensions. Given the political calendars in both America and Turkey — with a Republican majority just swept into Congress in Washington and a national election less than seven months away in Ankara — pushing against the alliance in both capitals, this is a prudent move.

Washington has been particularly unhappy with Ankara's responses to Jerusalem and Tehran, which has in turn fed the perception of an "axis shift" that sees the re-orientation of Turkish foreign policy eastward as a zero-sum game that is costing the country its traditional Western leanings. Unfortunately for these critics, the rise of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party and its conservative nationalist Muslim worldview as the dominant and unrivaled force in Turkish politics is a fact of life given divided domestic opposition and a stalled EU process. Rather than seeing further democratization and reform in Turkey, Washington now sees a final nail being placed in the coffin of the military and secular elites that once protected American interests. Adjusting to the new Turkey that not only does not march to America's drum takes time, particularly when it creates its own diplomatic rhythm with the likes of Brazil, China, and Iran. However the advantages of keeping Turkey actively engaged with America and the transatlantic community is mutually beneficial.

Misreading Turkey today will bolster the very internal forces the West fears. It will give credence to the false claims that Turkey can never be part of the West and allow factions within the country to move Turkey's foreign policy in an even more extreme direction. It risks demonizing Turkey precisely at a moment in which Washington should be actively coordinating with Ankara. There is genuine cause for concern with Turkey, and the U.S.-Turkish relationship has reached a critical point, but all is not lost, even in wake of the WikiLeaks release.

The silver lining from the WikiLeaks release is that, like it or not, all of Washington's cards are publicly on the table with Ankara. Hopefully this opportunity is not lost on simply a half-hearted apology, but rather will lead to a much needed catharsis in U.S.-Turkish relations that involves a more transparent and candid assessment of each partner's aims and policies that can be publicly affirmed. The degree to which America's and Turkey's interests still converge more than they diverge in the long-term is an open question. Turkey may not be the model partner that America had hoped for, however neither is America the omnipotent global

superpower that it has been revered and reviled as throughout most of Turkish history. The sooner both partners come to terms with the new realities of their relationship, the better.

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