



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“The Future of the U.S.-Turkey Relationship”

**Center for American Progress
1333 H Street NW, 10th Floor
Washington, D.C.**

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The Center for American Progress (CAP) hosted a discussion titled “The Future of the U.S.-Turkey Relationship” on Wednesday. **Brian Katulis**, senior fellow at CAP, moderated a panel composed of **Steven Cook**, senior fellow of Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, **Soner Cagaptay**, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and **Michael Werz**, senior fellow at CAP. As part of the larger discussion of Turkey-U.S. relations, the panelists addressed the development of democracy in Turkey.

According to **Cook**, AKP’s initial emphasis on reform set the unrealistic expectation in the West that Turkey was on a direct, linear path toward a Western-style democracy. **Many in the U.S. and Europe ignored the fact that democratic transitions are inherently complicated and non-linear.** That said, Cook emphasized that Turkey today is more democratic than ever before. In the past five years, AKP has faced many challenges, including attempts to close the party and the break up its governing coalition. These realities have exposed AKP’s tendency to resort to populism and repressive tactics to stabilize its political position. **Overall, Cook said, Turkey has taken many steps forward and few steps back under AKP.**

Werz agreed with Cook’s assessment and suggested that Turkey’s complicated process of democratization presents two challenges for relations with the U.S. and NATO. First, Western analysts misleadingly attribute recent changes to creeping Islamization. **According to Werz, economic reform was the root cause of the shifts we have seen over the past ten years, including AKP’s rise.** Second, economic developments have driven Central Anatolian businessman to look to Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East for export opportunities.

Counter to Cook and Werz, Cagaptay said that AKP is today an authoritarian party with illiberal tendencies. Cagaptay contrasted what he called “AKP 1.0” with “AKP 2.0” which has ruled with an increasingly heavy hand since the breakup of AKP’s coalition in 2005. **This shrinking space for discussion and dissent is likely to have a negative effect on Turkey’s foreign policy, Cagaptay said.**

Cook responded that he disagrees with Cagaptay’s assessment of AKP. The party is at a crossroads. It just survived an incredibly challenging period during which its leaders employed authoritarian solutions, but it is unclear how the situation will develop in the future. According to Cook, Turkey is, in reality, a six year old democracy (the country’s previous constitutions were not democratic). **Consequentially, the country is still at the beginning of what will likely be a very long road.**

Werz said that he was slightly more optimistic than Cook for two reasons: First, AKP has successfully established the principle of civilian rule, a historic achievement. Second, AKP has strengthened religious pluralism. **The U.S must continue to press the AKP government on freedom of the press and expression, but overall there has been significant progress.**

According to Cagaptay, AKP has not pursued a policy of democratization, but simply “civilianization.” If AKP wins a super majority in next year’s parliamentary election, the situation could deteriorate rapidly, Cagaptay said. He added that developments over the next year will ultimately be a function of elite politics. **His central concern is that under AKP, those who do not fit a strict conservative mold will be marginalized.** The new constitution will be a key indicator of where AKP is heading, Cagaptay said.