

Strategic Imperatives, Democratic Rhetoric:

The United States and Turkey, 1945-52

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This article traces the parallel evolution of American-Turkish relations and Turkish democratisation from 1945 to 1952. It shows how American officials disregarded the Turkish experiment with democracy when formulating policy even as they publicized the merits of Turkish democratisation to the American people and the US Congress. US decision-makers knew that they needed Turkey as a bulwark against the Soviet Union in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. To that end, officials in Washington pondered over ways to integrate Turkey to the emerging Western camp at the right moment and in the most cost-effective way.

From 1945 until 1952, American-Turkish relations were driven by *realpolitik*. US policy involved significant measures to promote closer ties between the United States and Turkey on the one hand and to garner domestic support for US objectives in Turkey on the other. The Truman administration used democracy as a rhetorical device in order to realise its goals in Turkey. The administration openly lauded the ‘development of Western democracy in Turkey’¹ but Turkey’s real importance for the United States lay in its location. The Americans, therefore, cared much more about internal stability in Turkey than the democratic nature of its regime. In fact, behind closed doors, they often saw the two as contradictory.²

1 Counsellor of the Embassy Herbert S. Bursley to the Secretary of State, dispatch. no. 1819, Ankara, 30 August 1947; *Internal Affairs of Turkey, 1945-1949* (hereafter *IAT*) [microfilm]; reel 4.

2 According to historian David Schmitz, at the meeting of US chiefs of mission in Rio de Janeiro in March 1950, George Kennan discussed how ‘Turkey and Portugal are examples of nations which have been successful in repressing Communism’. ‘It is better,’ Kennan continued, ‘to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists’. Kennan quoted in Schmitz, *Thank God They’re On Our Side*, 149.

Turkish President İsmet İnönü did not share that view. On 12 October 1945, he received Senator Claude Pepper (Democrat, Florida) and US Ambassador Edwin Wilson and told his guests that he wished to establish a genuinely representative democracy in Turkey, defining his criterion for success as follows: 'The day when I can sit in the Assembly as leader of the Opposition, I shall regard my role in behalf of Turkey as fulfilled'.³ The decision to open Turkish politics led to İnönü's defeat in the general elections of 1950, fulfilling the veteran statesman's wishes. As he put it years later, 'my defeat was my greatest victory'.⁴

³ Edwin Wilson to the Secretary of State, telegram no.1352, Ankara, 19 October 1945, *IAT*, reel 1.

⁴ Quoted in Aydemir, *İkinci Adam*, 2: 415.