

# Remembering Turgut Ozal: Some Personal Recollections

MORTON ABRAMOWITZ\*

**ABSTRACT** *An American ambassador recounts some of his dealings with Turgut Ozal, particularly on the first Iraq war, and provides his personal view of the man, his personality, and his legacy.*

**T**wo very different Turkish leaders have played impressively on both the world and domestic stages—Turgut Ozal and Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Both have been transformational leaders with great achievements. Ozal was a new type of Turkish leader with a realistic vision for where Turkey should be headed, and the intellect, pragmatism, determination and political skill to remake the economy. He dominated the Turkish scene for a decade.

Erdogan, the beneficiary of Ozal's radical changes, has followed in his footsteps but had nothing like Ozal's knowledge and experience. He has rather a different style of pugnacious,

in your face, endlessly pronouncing leadership. Still, he also has had the personality, dynamism, and political skills to do no less than change Turkey politically and give the country a cache it never had.

For all his achievements, however, Ozal left office diminished and unpopular. I remember vividly his coming to a performance of the Ankara symphony where only a few in the large audience stood up when he entered last. After ten incredible years, Erdogan retains great public approval. But unlike Ozal, who won great affection in the U.S. during the Gulf war, Americans outside of Mr. Obama know little of Erdogan or

\* Former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey

**Insight Turkey**  
Vol. 15 / No. 2 /  
2013, pp. 37-46

can pronounce his name correctly. Indeed, many in the American *coscienti* dislike his “doings” and fear the direction he is leading Turkey. Personal American views of Turkish leaders don’t carry much ice in Turkey, but I have been asked to provide one American’s perspective on Ozal, although I will frequently compare the two leaders, the second unfortunately mostly from afar. The perceived differences may help illuminate my picture of Ozal.

### Some Optics

I became a personal Ozal fan from the start of my ambassadorship in Turkey (July 1989-July 1991). I went to the border with Bulgaria in the late summer of 1989 shortly after my arrival to view the exodus of huge numbers of Turkish Bulgarians forced to leave Bulgaria. I received an appointment to see then Prime Minister to give him a few suggestions on generating greater international support to help deal with the large influx. He thanked me for the suggestions and then turned to his assistants and said in Turkish (my Turkish speaking assistant Robert Finn later told me) don’t let the bureaucracy get hold of this and just do it. I have remained a fan since. I probably had the easiest of times for American ambassadors in Turkey, because I could when necessary bypass the bureaucracy, go to Ozal, and get an answer right away, even if it was not always one I wanted to hear.

I had numerous discussions with Ozal since those early days, particu-

larly over the Iraq war and limiting its adverse impact on Turkey. I saw him with George H. W. Bush in the US and in Turkey, and met him several times in the U.S. after I left Turkey in July 1991, including on his hospital bed in Houston. I saw him alone in Ankara a few weeks before he died. This recounting is based not on detailed research but on my recollections, perhaps wrong sometimes but if so impaired by age not by design.

I will first discuss my sense of Ozal’s perspective of the U.S., go on to the two issues that consumed much of my time and brought me into close contact with him-- the first Iraq war and its Kurdish aftermath and the American Armenian genocide debate of 1990 in Washington, and end with my perspective on Ozal as leader and personality.

### Ozal and the U.S.

Unlike the present Turkish leadership, the U.S. always occupied a special political and personal place for Ozal. Of course the world has changed and Ozal’s Turkey was different than today’s far more dynamic and influential Turkey. For most of his prime ministerial time Ozal focused on radically changing the Turkish economy and restoring domestic politics; he was careful not to challenge his military overlords. He wanted large-scale American aid and support for his efforts to transform Turkey into a market oriented economy and continuing American military assistance to better preserve

internal stability and keep the military satisfied. The U.S. and NATO remained the coin of the realm as long as the Soviet Union lived, a perspective Ozal always maintained even after its demise, but one that changed initially when the AKP took power. The US connection also was essential for much of everything else he wanted to do —e.g., to spur the EU accession process, to help make Turkey a regional power and support his first, mostly economic, forays into the Central Asian republics and the Middle East (later much more effectively emulated by Erdogan with a far more dynamic Turkey), to make peace with Greece — because Ozal knew that the U.S. was still the major external player in most areas, cold war or not.

The end of the cold war and Russia's weakness but also growing energy ties with Russia did have a big impact on Erdogan and his party's view of the declining importance of the American connection. Indeed Erdogan's efforts in the Middle East initially seemed more designed to weaken Western influence in the region. Only the unending Syrian war and the failure of his zero problems policy ultimately led Erdogan to value more the utility of the American/NATO connection. Although Ozal liberalized Turkey's economy and the country began to attract foreign investment, he did not have the impressive economic muscle that Erdogan has had at home and abroad, and his efforts in the Middle East bore little result, although they helped Turkish contractors make real inroads into the area as well as in Central Asia.

**Although Ozal liberalized Turkey's economy and the country began to attract foreign investment, he did not have the impressive economic muscle that Erdogan has had at home and abroad**

I felt Ozal's attitude toward the US went beyond America's political and economic support. He had become, probably because of his time at the World Bank in Washington, somewhat infatuated with the U.S. and the nature of American life. An engineer by training he valued the dynamism, the freedom, and creativity he saw in the US. On a number of occasions he talked about his hopes of eventually seeing it emulated in Turkey. Every time I saw him but once, he had TV on, invariably CNN, and he would occasionally look over to see what was playing. He would mention frequently to me his attachment to American gadgetry and talked about them in ways I frankly did not understand. Many of the young Turks he gathered around him and promoted to top jobs usually had advanced American degrees. More important he valued the openness and give and take in American political life and wanted to see more of that in Turkey. I found him open most of the time, quite candid, and rarely ritualistic in discussion. He cavorted endlessly with reporters. While the Turkish press in many ways was more constrained than to-

day's, Ozal did not dominate the media like Erdogan and was not able or interested in intimidating the media or focused on keeping unfavorable news from the public in contrast to the current administration. In short Ozal was liberal and mostly dispassionate in his thinking, which contributed significantly to his dealings with and views of the U.S., however disappointed he became at the end of his life.

## Iraq

The Iraq war was the decisive event of my time in Turkey. The Iraq issue took a turn Turkey never dreamed of. Ozal was in the thick of it before the war even began. Ozal had a good whiff of Saddam after the gassing of Kurds

**He was aghast that the US would leave Iraq with Saddam still in charge. He felt this portended a future disaster. Ozal was, of course, right and a greater disaster ultimately unfolded for Iraq and the U.S.**

in Halabja and the unwelcome flight of some 60,000 to Turkey. He was an early advocate for accelerating Saddam's departure. His unique role in the war was invaluable, but in his last few years it came back to haunt him.

Early on during the troubles between Kuwait and Iraq, Ozal began to wor-

ry that Turkey may be in store for the worse. Having lived through the energy nightmare of the seventies for Turkey he deeply feared the impact of another energy crisis on his economic revitalization. Despite his strong religious attachment he also despised his fellow Sunni Saddam Hussein, his dictatorship, and his brutalities, unlike Mr. Erdogan who still sees no problem embracing the genocidal Islamic ruler of Sudan. He particularly despised the way top Iraqis walked around with guns in their belts, even in Turkey.

When war came Ozal quickly cut off Iraq's pipeline to Turkey, a costly measure even before George Bush Senior asked him to do so. The formal closing of the pipeline after an urgent UN resolution led to an impressive friendship between Bush and Ozal and a constant telephone relationship between the two, probably more than Bush had with most if not all Allied leaders. It also led to four visits to Turkey by Secretary of State James Baker and an exchange of visits by the two Presidents.

Washington sought three commitments from Turkey before the war began: the use of Incirlik and a few other bases for military operations in Iraq, the movement of Turkish forces to the Iraq border to tie down Iraqi forces in the north, and the deployment of a Turkish unit to Saudi Arabia to join the other countries in the coalition. Ozal agreed to them all, but the Turkish military opposed the small unit for Saudi Arabia, for reasons I never really knew, but sus-



Turkish President Turgut Özal met with USA President George Bush at OSCE meeting in Paris, 1990.

AA / Selahattin Yılmaz

pected that Turkish military leaders did not want Turkish units fighting against Arabs. It was mostly a cosmetic matter and Washington saw no need to push Ozal. One added bonus was Ozal's quick approval to my urgent telephone request of overflight rights over southern Turkey for American bombers already headed for Iraq to start the war.

Parliamentary approval was required for American use of the bases, but Ozal would not seek it until he was sure that the Americans would actually fight. He prudently had some

doubts. He obtained Parliamentary approval the day the war started but he was virtually alone ideologically. It was a highly unpopular action similar to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Ozal had ruffled many feathers; senior government figures often did not know what he was doing or promising. His direct deal-making from the position of the Presidency was resented and ultimately cost him politically.

Ozal thought he would get significant American aid to compensate for Turkey's war costs and economic losses

in Iraq. The Bush administration did try hard to get other peoples' monies, such as from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. They succeeded in getting roughly one billion dollars from them, much in oil, but not the 3-4 billion dollars Ozal had hoped for. I contributed in a small way to public dissatisfaction from their misunderstanding of a public phrase I used to express Turkish involvement: "in for a dime, in for a dollar." My imagery was mistakenly interpreted by many politicians and the media to mean that if Turkey put up one million dollars they would somehow get ten million back. Ozal had also hoped that the close relations would after the war bring other benefits: less trouble with the Greek lobby, progress on Cyprus, more military assistance to help modernize Turkish forces, help toward EU accession, and numerous others. Discussions within the U.S. government significantly increased and Washington indeed helped on some of these issues, but not as much as Ozal had hoped for in a short-term time frame. Nevertheless Ozal's efforts did lead in part to what he wanted - a greater and permanent American interest and connection to Turkey after the Soviet Union's demise.

Despite the Bush-Ozal visit in 1991, a victory celebration in Turkey with its outpouring of personal friendship and the promise of vastly enhanced relations, the Iraq war ended badly politically for Ozal. He was aghast that the US would leave Iraq with Saddam still in charge. He felt this portended a future disaster. He tried to weigh in with Bush, but the deci-

**Ozal was the first to recommend the establishment of a safe haven in northern Iraq where Kurds would return and be protected**

sion had been quickly made. Ozal was, of course, right and a greater disaster ultimately unfolded for Iraq and the U.S.

The second unhappy result of the war for Ozal was to be left with an enormous Iraqi Kurdish problem. From the war's start, the U.S. had stimulated a Kurdish revolt, but when the revolt came after the armistice, Saddam, his hands no longer tied, moved his forces to destroy the uprising. The US did nothing and in April and May of 1991 a million Kurds fled to Iran and some half million to the mountain borders of Turkey. Ozal, normally a humane man, felt it politically impossible to allow them refuge in Turkey for an indefinite time. (Erdogan has been impressive in his humane management of Turkey's vast Syrian refugee population.) Ozal begged the allies to do something to resolve the problem. He was the first to recommend the establishment of a safe haven in northern Iraq where Kurds would return and be protected. The allies hurriedly agreed to establish a protected zone and with Turkish parliamentary ap-

proval to have air power from Incirlik constantly flown over the region to deter Saddam. By mid-summer, all the Kurds returned to northern Iraq—an extraordinary operation. Ozal again overcame Parliamentary skepticism, and Northern Iraq became a protected area. Much of American effort in Turkey for the next decade was to help insure periodic Turkish parliamentary approval of these air operations.

Many parliamentarians and much of the media and public feared the protected area would ultimately lead to an independent Kurdish entity. Many believed, as some still do, that the U.S. had always wanted to establish an independent Kurdish state in Turkey and the Iraq zone would be the first real step in that direction. We assured them that that would not happen, that Saddam would soon be gone and the Kurds would be part of a different Iraq. We were, of course, wrong, while subsequently the PKK improved its position in an unmonitored northern Iraq. This difficult episode was a cruel blow to Ozal and further diminished his already declining standing in Turkey, including the animosity of the military and much of the bureaucracy. He had loosely talked of permanent Turkish influence in Iraq or even control of Kirkuk and Mosul and that also came back to haunt him. Ironically, after being long isolated by successive Turkish governments, Northern Iraq has become a prosperous, quasi-independent area, the result of a brilliant policy change by Erdogan to engage the Kurdish zone.

## Dealing with the Armenian Genocide Resolution

I cite the Armenian Genocide resolution Senate debate of March 1990 briefly to show Ozal's breadth and realism. This Congressional effort declaring the destruction of the Armenians during the first world-war genocide continues to emerge in one or the other house of Congress, and for the last fifty years has caused much Turkish heartburn. It is today a somewhat smaller bane of Turkish-American relations. The murder of Turkish diplomats by Armenian terrorists in the seventies was still raw in Turkey in 1990 and certainly in the Foreign Ministry. Feelings ran very high. It came up again but very seriously in early 1990 because the very capable Senate Republican majority leader, Robert Dole, was now leading the charge.

Ozal was all too aware of the vagaries of American politics, having had to deal with such wonderful American traditions as the seven-ten ratio of American military assistance to Turkey and Greece for his first decade in office. They all got in the way of his efforts to a principal goal—deepening Turkish-American relations. After almost a decade he was tired of the genocide issue but then feared its impact on his freedom of action with looming Middle East strife.

In 1989, he tried to fend off another resolution effort by opening up the Ottoman archives from 1895 through World War I and promising to accept whatever emerged from their study.

That brought no relief and considerable cynicism abroad. Ozal had to express his public ire with the U.S. because of the strong views of his public as well as foreign and defense agencies. I felt, perhaps wrongly, he did not care much one way or the other about such a resolution, thinking in the end it would not make much difference. In one unguarded moment he said to me—“let them pass the God damn resolution and let’s be done with it.” He may have felt that the consequences would be

**Ozal was deeply religious and showed it in public. His religious views, however, did not suppress his strong liberal feelings, great intellectual openness, and a dedication to the secular state and greater democracy**

manageable. But during this tense time in relations he would at a few public receptions publicly snub me to show his ire with the Americans. I did not take it personally. I lobbied hard directly with some 60 American senators, not asserting the Turkish case on the genocide-- I did not believe it- but emphasizing rather the importance of Turkey in dealing with the coming trouble in the Middle East.

The Turks won the Senate vote because of Senator Robert Byrd, who

rallied senators and defeated the resolution by two votes. Byrd was lionized when he visited Turkey soon after the Iraq invasion but is now a forgotten hero in Turkey. The vote was the closest such a resolution had ever come to passing in one house of the Congress. Had it passed Turkish anger toward the U.S. might well have tied Ozal’s hand on Iraq. The U.S. dodged a bullet.

One aspect of the 1990 genocide resolution debate has a contemporary relevance. Turkish relations with Israel had steadily improved in Ozal’s time and even more in the rest of the nineties. To enhance Turkish-American relations a massive public effort was mounted in Turkey and the U.S. to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, mostly to Ottoman Turkey. The Turkish government highly valued the political influence of the “Jewish lobby” in the US and sought and mostly received their support to defeat the 1990 genocide resolution as well as subsequent efforts to pass such a resolution. The more recent sharp deterioration of Turkey-Israel relations has led to its absence of involvement in the genocide resolution last year, nor did Turkey much need it as its strategic importance has grown, causing American presidential aspirants to forget their campaign promises. There is, moreover, an increasing belief today among many Jews and other Americans that the AKP and its leaders are not only anti-Israel but anti-semitic, whatever their denunciation of anti-semitism.

## Ozal the Man

Ozal was deeply religious and showed it in public. His repeated pilgrimages to Mecca, attendance at Friday prayers, and *iftar* dinners for foreign diplomats caused concern in the military and other fiercely dedicated secularists. Some of the leading members of the secular group of his party would frequently harangue me about his “closet fundamentalism.” His religious views, however, did not suppress his strong liberal feelings, great intellectual openness, and a dedication to the secular state and greater democracy. Religious belief and modernization were not contradictory for him. He did not see the world through the prism of religion and was unlike Erdogan more genuinely part of the Western world. Erdogan is also a deeply religious man, who has grown enormously in office and affirms his belief in secularism and democracy. But he still seems more interested in propagating his religious views and practices in Turkish public life. In foreign policy, he apparently views the Middle East from a religious and sectarian Sunni perspective. He also seems to take great pleasure in denouncing all who “oppose” him, particularly in the media. Ozal incessantly tried to influence the press by talking to them constantly and playing favorites, not by intimidating them, the current practice in Turkey.

Ozal had an uncanny knack of thinking big about the world and Turkey’s role in it. He saw the Middle East as an area for revival under Turkish tutelage but in more realistic terms

than zero problems with neighbors, however nice that sound. He was the first modern Turkish leader to try to break the barrier between Turkey and the Arab world, but he did not get far. He was also preoccupied with the Kurdish problem and recognized the inherent existential problem created by the denial of Kurdish identity in Turkey. Here too he was the first Turkish leader to begin to seriously address the problem, which also made the military and other nationalists more suspicious of him.

When I last saw him alone a few weeks before his death—the only time the TV was not on-- much of our conversation was about Kurds. He had become openly despondent about the prospects for progress on the Kurdish issue. He thought politically it was so hard to break nationalist feelings, that only more private investment in the southeast would be the answer to violence, but it wasn’t happening. He mused that the only answer now was emigration: More and More Kurds were already leaving the Southeast. In short we should take the people to where the investment was. I am not sure whether he meant it. Erdogan, of course, has gone far beyond Ozal in tackling the Kurdish issue, building on the impressive change in political consciousness in Turkey to finally try politically to end the three decades of violence and better unite the country.

For a decade Ozal dominated Turkey, but he left life a disappointed man and not much honored. That was tough for his last days. At that last meeting with him in Cankaya Palace he was

tired, despondent, and I suspect, he knew he was dying. He felt his powerlessness, the declining reputation, and the betrayal of his political underlings who refused to follow him --a theme I also heard from him in the few times we met in the U.S. He can now rest better: his star has again risen in Turkey. Mostly forgotten are the high inflation rate during his presidency, the much maligned management by his family and friends, the problem of vast corruption in his administration and his supposed dedication to the rich and influential. But today, he is viewed once again as the man who changed the economic system and revolutionized Turkey, a pioneer and creator. I did not witness that period of the eighties but read enough, talked enough, and saw enough to know that is true. Erdogan has, after a decade mostly of stasis in the 90s in Turkey, successfully built on that legacy to lead Turkey to a new level of power and influence. It is that economic legacy and the Iraq war that informed and older Americans remember Ozal.

Ozal's last four years as President, however unhappy the ending, were impressive beyond Iraq and other efforts. He did something that Erdogan aspires now to do institutionally, run Turkey from the Presidency. Ozal did it not by Constitutional change but by appointing a man he could control from the Palace while also retaining dominance of his Party. That came crashing down when Mesut Yilmaz took over as Prime Minister.

Ozal had a wonderful informality. A few times I met with him in his bathrobe. I also remember the occasional pictures of his reviewing the troops in his bathing suit. The military just endured it. Indeed I was also impressed by the sudden resignation of Turkey's top general—Necip Torumtay-- who was deeply dismayed not so much by bathing suits but by Ozal's making military commitments to the U.S. without his involvement. Another general might have taken somewhat tougher action. ■