

# TRANSFORMING THE U.S.-TURKEY ALLIANCE

*Today, significant changes within Turkey and tectonic shifts in the geopolitics of the surrounding region are casting the U.S.-Turkish alliance in a new light. Senator John McCain outlines these changes, explains that the strategic interests of the two countries are highly complementary at this time of turbulence in the Middle East, and presents a vision for the two countries to invest in each other's success. The Senator also notes the importance of Turkey setting the highest standards of democratic development for people in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia who look to Turkey for lessons on how to guide their own struggles for justice.*

John McCain\*

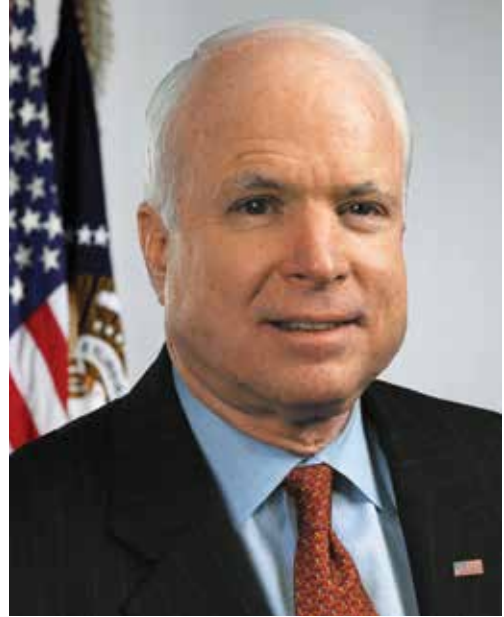


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\*\* This article is based on a speech delivered by the Senator at the Middle East Institute's Third Annual Conference on Turkey, in Washington, D.C., on 27 June 2012.

**T**hroughout my decades of involvement in U.S.-Turkish relations, I cannot recall a more dynamic and exciting time for our alliance than right now. These are times of significant change within Turkey and tectonic shifts in the geopolitics of the surrounding region – both of which are casting our alliance in a new light.

Over the past few years, there has been a lot of debate in the United States about what these changes in Turkey mean. We have heard it said that Turkey is embracing Islam at the expense of secularism, that it is turning its back on the West in favor of the East, and that U.S.-Turkish cooperation is being displaced by a more tense rivalry. Some commentators have even asked; “Who lost Turkey?”



Much of this recent debate about Turkey has missed the point. It tends to romanticize the past and misread the present. The fact is, Turkey is changing, and the nature of our alliance is changing with it. Nonetheless, there is every reason to believe that these changes mostly can be, and should be, for the better. Indeed, we now have an opportunity to fundamentally transform our alliance –to make it broader, deeper, more durable, and more relevant– in short, to make it one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world for both of our countries.

No one should expect this to be easy. It will not be. Nor does it mean that we will cease to have our disagreements. Those will persist. But if we remain guided by a few core principles, we can succeed in transforming our alliance.

One of those principles is that the United States and Turkey need to deal with each other realistically, talk with each other honestly, and build greater trust.

This should begin with us in the United States. We need to realize that the U.S.-Turkey alliance does not consist of Americans giving orders and Turks getting

in line – and to the extent that we have acted this way in the past, it might explain why many Turks still view our country with mistrust and even distaste. We also need to realize that our alliance with Turkey, like other relationships that we value most, should not be reduced to the one-dimensional perspectives of domestic special interests, as worthy as they may be. But perhaps most importantly, we Americans need to realize that we are now dealing with a different Turkey.

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Over the past decade, Turkey’s democracy has become more inclusive and more representative of Turkish society as a whole, including the many citizens who want greater freedom to express their identity as Muslims. As a result, Turkey is defining a new balance between its Islamic and secular heritages, and between the authority of elected civilian leaders and the military’s historic role in political life. The United States should not view either of these developments as inherently bad. At the same time, the Turkish economy has experienced a decade of strong growth, which has fueled an emerging middle class, catapulted Turkey into the ranks of elite global decision makers, and inspired a more confident Turkish foreign policy.

These positive trends sit side by side with other, more troubling ones. It is widely reported that there are more journalists in jail in Turkey than in any other country, and that intimidation of the media is a persistent problem. The ongoing detention and prosecution of military officers have raised suspicions that many of these actions are politically motivated, which has cast the illiberal tendencies of some Turkish leaders in a more disturbing light. Finally, the recent deterioration of Turkey’s relationship with Israel cannot serve any responsible interest, and it is especially painful for us, as we count both Israel and Turkey as vital allies.

I take no pleasure in pointing out issues such as these, and I do so not as an enemy of Turkey, but as one of its strongest and most enduring friends – who believes that it is only through a candid exchange of views that we will build trust and make the most of this opportunity to transform our alliance. If we are not open and honest with one another, especially where we differ –if leaders in both of our countries do not defend this alliance and explain its new importance to

our publics, even when it may be unpopular to do so— we will be consumed by fruitless introspection, rather than directing our energies outward to advance our common interests and values.

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We must deal with each other realistically – but we must do more than that. We must also invest in each other’s success. Contrary to the dictates of *realpolitik*, America does not fear the growth of Turkish power, nor do we seek to limit it. To the contrary, we have a major stake in Turkey’s success, and we want to enhance it – politically, economically, and militarily. A more capable, more active, and more influential Turkey with which we share values is a net benefit to

America’s national interests, and both of our countries need to invest more ambitiously in this relationship, just as the United States and India have done with each other.

One way to do that is by strengthening our common struggle against terrorism, especially the PKK. Turkey’s recent strikes against PKK fighters in Iraq, and the PKK’s continuous attacks throughout the summer of 2012, in which many Turkish soldiers tragically lost their lives, are but one indication of the persistent threat of this terrorist group. That is why Senator Joe Lieberman and I authored a resolution expressing Congress’s solidarity with Turkey in the fight against the PKK, and urging greater cooperation against its international financing and propaganda efforts, as well as greater U.S. intelligence and military support for Turkish actions to take senior PKK leaders off the battlefield. Such steps could empower Turkish leaders who want to address the legitimate demands of Turkey’s Kurdish citizens, as Prime Minister Erdoğan has shown a desire to do.

Another way to invest in each other’s success is through greater trade, and here we need to be much more ambitious. The best way to do so would be to explore the possibility of negotiating a Free Trade Agreement. More ambitious still would be to join with Turkey in constructing a new architecture of open trade for the Middle East and North Africa, similar to the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Turkey's relations with the EU may complicate these goals, but this has not proved problematic between Turkey and other states. It should not hold us back either.

Similarly, while our defense trade and cooperation remains strong, we now have a huge opportunity to expand it even further. Turkey is one of the only NATO member states that is actually increasing its defense spending. Turkey is talking about acquiring a vast array of more advanced defense capabilities – ground, naval, air, intelligence, and missile defense. The United States is a natural partner for Turkey in its military modernization. And we should use this as an opportunity to better align our military capabilities, to become more interoperable, and to devise a common strategic framework to guide cooperation between our defense industries.

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More important than how we relate to each other, and more important even than how we invest in one another's success, is what we do together – how we can align our great power in pursuit of common goals, not just responding to events in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, but leading and shaping those events for the better, in accordance with our shared interests and values.

It is certainly true that a more powerful Turkey is more able and willing to go its own way when its national interests demand. But what is equally true, and far more important, is that the interests and values of a rising, democratic Turkey are increasingly in alignment with ours. This is evident through our cooperation on missile defense, our major contributions together in Afghanistan, and our closely coordinated efforts in response to the revolutionary changes sweeping the broader Middle East. Indeed, despite our occasional differences, our countries increasingly share a larger vision for the future of this vital region. It is a vision of democracy, individual rights, opportunity, and the rule of law – a vision, most importantly, that we share with the vast majority of people from North Africa to Central Asia.

*“Modern Turkey has never had greater influence to shape the development of its region, and with that power comes an even greater responsibility – the responsibility to lead by example.”*

Our ability to translate this common vision into action is being tested across the region, but nowhere more than Syria. It is now believed that more than 30,000 lives have been lost, and still Bashar al-Assad escalates the violence – going from infantry and snipers, to tanks and artillery, to unleashing plain-clothes thugs to commit mass atrocities, and now to helicopter gunships, aircraft, and cluster bombs.<sup>1</sup> Syria’s attack on a Turkish fighter jet on 22 June, and the artillery shellings

from across the border which on 3 October, resulted in death of five Turkish civilians. Incidents such as these fit into this troubling pattern of escalation in the conflict.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Assad’s slaughter is being enabled by Russian and Iranian weapons, and there are even reports of Iranian operatives on the ground in Syria. Clearly, this is not a fair fight.

In April, thanks to the special efforts of the Turkish government, Senator Joe Lieberman and I visited a Syrian refugee camp in southern Turkey. I have seen my share of suffering and death, but the stories that those Syrians told still haunt me – men who had lost all of their children, women and girls who had been gang raped, children who had been tortured. And none of this was the random acts of cruelty that sadly occur in war. Syrian army defectors told us that killing, rape, and torture was what they were instructed to do as a tool of terror and intimidation.

The situation in Syria cries out for U.S. leadership – not just to save Syrian lives, but to support our ally, Turkey, when they need our support the most. The conflict in Syria is becoming a strategic threat to Turkey. The country is already facing massive flows of refugees, as the recent figures surpasses 100,000. The longer this conflict grinds on, the worse it gets – the more sectarian divisions harden, the more Al-Qaeda gains influence, the more the Syrian state disintegrates, and the more Turkey is faced with violent chaos on its border.

1 “Syria’s Civil War: The Killing Fields,” *The Economist*, 20 October 2012, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21564840-despite-huge-risks-involved-time-has-come-west-and-arabs-intervene>

2 “Turkey Strikes Back After Syrian Shelling Kills 5 Civilians,” *The New York Times*, 3 October 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/04/world/middleeast/syria.html?pagewanted=all>

The United States needs to devote a fuller measure of its power to help end the conflict in Syria as soon as possible – not just because it is the right thing to do, and not just because it will be a strategic defeat for Iran, but because it can help to consolidate a new kind of relationship with Turkey. It can show the Turkish people and government that America is willing to take risks for the sake of their security and to invest in their success – that we are not an unreliable partner or a declining power, as some in Turkey allege. We cannot afford to squander this opportunity.

The conflict in Syria is but one part of a larger story that is now unfolding across North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. It is a story of struggle by people throughout this region to reconcile Islam with democratic politics and a secular state, to subordinate the power of armed groups and military forces to elected civilian authorities, to resolve ethnic and sectarian differences through politics instead of violence, to balance the dynamism of free markets with popular demands for equitable economic development, and to do all of this while waging a broader struggle against the subversive and hegemonic ambitions of Iran.

Turkey is now a central player in this epic story. And as I travel through the region again and again, it is clear how inspired people are by Turkey's success, and how much they wish to emulate it in their countries. Modern Turkey has never had greater influence to shape the development of its region, and with that power comes an even greater responsibility – the responsibility to lead by example.

More and more people in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia are now looking to Turkey for lessons to guide their own struggles for justice. It is essential that they learn the right lessons, especially as it concerns the rights of minorities, religious liberty and tolerance, freedom for journalists, relations with neighbors, and the integrity of democratic institutions. In short, Turkey's ability to set the highest standards of democratic development has never been more critical.

In all of these endeavors, Turkey and the United States can accomplish far more together than apart. It is this simple: if the broader Middle East comes to be defined more by peace than war, more by prosperity than misery, and more by freedom than tyranny, future historians will surely look back and point to the fact that two of the world's preeminent democratic powers, Turkey and the United States, transformed their long-standing alliance to address the new realities of the 21st century. If we keep this vision of our relationship always uppermost in our minds, there is no dispute we cannot resolve, no investment we cannot make in each other's success, and nothing we cannot accomplish together.