

TURKISH - U.S. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Over the decades, the Turkish-American relationship has transcended the limits of a political and military alliance, evolving into a strategic partnership that comprises not only political but also economic, cultural, and social spheres. The vision of a model partnership takes the Turkish-American relationship a step further than ever before. It envisages close cooperation between a secular and predominantly Muslim nation that has multiple regional identities and a Western superpower with global standing. We believe that Turkey's relations with other global actors are complementary. Our relations with the United States and the EU complement our presence in Eurasia and the Middle East and are not mutually exclusive.

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During the long decades of the Cold War, Turkey was primarily known for her military-strategic contribution to NATO in defense of freedom. Now, we are increasingly known for our regional ties, economic dynamism, and secular democracy. There is hardly a day when an item related to Turkey does not appear on the cover pages of newspapers in the United States, Europe, the Middle East, or Asia. While Turkish democracy continues to thrive, offering a strong antidote to the anxiety of clash of civilizations, the performance of the Turkish economy is cited by many as a remarkable model.

These dynamics, together with the unique historical, cultural, and geographical characteristics of Turkey, enable us to make our contribution to the quest for lasting peace and stability in our part of the world. Indeed, Turkish diplomacy has become an active force in projecting peace and stability in a wider geography spanning the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Asia.

However, conflicts and disputes in our immediate and further neighborhood and beyond are far from resolved. Indeed, the Iranian nuclear issue remains elusive; Iraq is yet to be secured from sources of instability; efforts to ameliorate the Arab-Israeli conflict have not produced the desired outcome, Turkish-Israeli relations are passing through difficult times; the Caucasus continues to witness ongoing conflicts; efforts to ensure stability in Bosnia-Herzegovina face challenges; despite positive developments, international efforts in Afghanistan still confront difficulties; and in Cyprus the ongoing isolation of the Turkish Cypriots continues despite attempts to achieve a lasting settlement. Turkey plays an important and frequently central role on each of these issues, all of which remain high on the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

When we meet with our U.S. counterparts, there is hardly a foreign policy issue that is important only for one side and not the other. That makes our strategic alliance a crucial factor for regional and international peace, security, and stability.

It is in this wider context that the relationship between Turkey and the United States is one of the most important and essential dimensions of our foreign policy. Turkish-American relations have been characterized for decades by close cooperation, solidarity, and strong bonds of friendship. They are based on common values of democracy, respect for human rights, rule of law, and free markets. We have been striving vigorously to further our shared interests and achieve common objectives in a wide geography. Sixty years ago, around this time of the year, we were fighting shoulder to shoulder in the mountains of Kunu-ri, Korea, to defend the values that characterize our societies. Since then we have acted together in various conflicts ranging from Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo to Afghanistan. We stand together in the fight against terrorism.

The Vision: A Model Partnership

Over the decades, the Turkish-American relationship has transcended the limits of a political and military alliance, evolving into a strategic partnership that comprises not only political but also economic, cultural, and social spheres. The positive change in the nature of our bilateral relationship was crowned by the visit of President Obama in April 2009. During his first bilateral overseas trip to Turkey, President Obama chose to use the term “model partnership” in describing Turkish-American relations. The vision of a model partnership takes the Turkish-American relationship a step further than ever before by envisaging close cooperation between a secular and predominantly Muslim nation that has multiple regional identities and a Western superpower with global standing.

This vision requires deepening and widening bilateral relations in fields other than military and strategic initiatives, notably in economic, commercial, and cultural spheres. Indeed, the depth of our relations in economic and commercial fields is not yet reflecting the nature of model partnership. Our total bilateral trade figure of ten billion dollars last year remains far below the true potential we could attain.

To address this gap, in line with the vision of model partnership, Turkey and the U.S. took a crucial step establishing the “Framework for Strategic Economic and Commercial Cooperation” (FSECC) in December 2009. The first meeting of FSECC was recently held in Washington, D.C., with the participation of four cabinet level dignitaries from the two countries. Turkey’s Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan and Minister of State Zafer Çağlayan, along

with the U.S Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke and Trade Representative Ambassador Ron Kirk discussed how best to tap into the existing potential. An important pillar of this new cooperation framework is the new Turkish American Business Council. This essential forum will bridge the gap between our private sectors and policy makers, allowing them to address mutual issues and opportunities.

It is unfortunate that two recent incidents have complicated these efforts to elevate our relationship to the level of a model partnership. The Turkish “no vote” on sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council on 9 June 2010, and the Israeli raid on the Gaza aid convoy on 31 May 2010, triggered a surge of commentaries in the United States suggesting a shift of axis in Turkish foreign policy and questioning Turkey’s allegiance to the Western world.

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However, these are unjustified. Beneath these criticisms lies the Cold War mentality of seeing the world in opposing and exclusive terms. If there was a shift of axis, how could one explain the presence of our troops in Afghanistan?

Turkey's Western vocation is a consistent and an irreversible process. Those who know Turkish history would know well that our Western vocation started long before the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923. We view our goal of European Union accession as the main pillar of our commitment to democracy, freedom and free markets and our place in NATO as the backbone of our national security as well as that of regional and global security.

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We believe that Turkey's relations with other global actors are complementary. We do not see any contradiction in increasing trade relations with our neighbors with our commitment to the West. Our relations with the United States and the EU complement our presence in Eurasia and the Middle East and are not mutually exclusive. The intensification of our relations with Syria and Russia does not indicate a shift of axis. Similarly, Turkey's leadership roles in the UN Security Council, G-20, the Organization of Islamic Conference, the Council of Europe, the South East European Cooperation Process, or the OECD are also complementary. Not

only is the Secretary General of the OIC a Turkish national, but so is the Chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. This is a clear example of the strength of Turkish diplomacy and the ability of Turkey to establish meaningful relations with different cultures and geographies. Not many allies of the United States can have such extensive engagements.

Turkey's Multi-Faceted Foreign Policy

Turkey is not immune from the consequences of conflicts in her region. The war in Iraq, the conflict in Palestine, disputes in Lebanon, hostilities between Russia and Georgia, the situation in Bosnia, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the Iranian nuclear issue have all had a direct or indirect impact on Turkey. Turkey has been severely affected by the wars in Iraq, and our economy was disrupted by the dispute between Russia and Georgia. Most likely, the Turkish economy will

be hit worse than any other country by further sanctions against Iran. Therefore, we cannot observe events as an idle bystander. The high stakes warrant an active Turkish foreign policy to prevent the escalation of conflicts. It is with this understanding that Turkey makes serious efforts to reconcile disputing parties in our region and beyond. These steps are necessary for Turkey's own security and for the stability of our neighboring regions. Turkey's efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue or to the differences in Bosnia should be viewed from this same perspective.

Viewing this multi-faceted active foreign policy as a shift of axis is not only inaccurate but also does an injustice to our sincere efforts to achieve peace and stability, to engage in more trade, to increase interdependency, and to solve conflicts through peaceful means. Turkey's ability to reach out to various actors from Afghanistan to Iraq and from Palestine to Bosnia should be seen as opportunities by our allies and not as a liability. We have the ability to call on the Islamic world to put its own house in order. It is Turkey that has led the efforts for the creation of a human rights body within the OIC. We have been playing a vital role in achieving stability and preserving the unity of Iraq. Turkey serves as a living example of a Muslim-majority country enjoying democratic standards and free markets. We have tried hard to restart the Israeli-Syrian peace track after eight years of stalling and the five rounds of indirect negotiations. We have facilitated a dialogue between the Bosnians and the Serbs as well as Afghans and Pakistanis.

Turkey's "zero problem policy towards neighbors" is inclusive and not based on religion or ideology. We have accomplished positive changes in our relations with all 12 of our direct and indirect neighbors, only four of which are Muslim majority countries. Turkey's trade volume with her neighbors has increased by six-fold over the last seven years. We have established high-level strategic council mechanisms with Greece, Syria, Iraq, and Russia. We have also achieved considerable progress in our relations with Armenia, while our relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia remain strong. We have lifted visa requirements with Russia, Syria, Albania, Lebanon, Jordan, Libya, and Serbia.

The Gaza Aid Convoy Incident

The Israeli raid against the Gaza humanitarian aid convoy in May and subsequent developments fed the negative caricature of a supposed change in Turkey's foreign policy direction. Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel and the second of all nations to do so after the United States. Our cooperation has continued uninterrupted for more than six decades. The relationship between the Turks and the Jews took root long before that, extending through five centuries. Turkish-Israeli relations have long been a positive factor in a world where we witness violent conflicts based on religion and faith.

This friendship between Turkey and Israel is jeopardized by the incident surrounding the Gaza Aid Convoy that left nine civilians dead – eight Turkish citizens and one American citizen of Turkish descent. This is the first time in the history of the Republic of Turkey that her citizens were killed by a sovereign state in peacetime. What made it worse was that this attack came from a friend.

The recent report of the Fact-Finding Mission set up by the UN Human Rights Council stated that Israel's armed interception of the convoy in international waters was clearly illegal, that Israeli soldiers used disproportionate force and resorted to unwarranted violence, that the interception represented a grave violation of human rights law as well as international humanitarian law and that Israel's own national investigations did not inspire confidence.¹

Despite all the anger and resentment among the Turkish public in the wake of the Gaza attack, Turkey was ready to address this profound crisis with Israel in a manner befitting two friends. We held the view that, as a friend, Israel should accept her wrongdoing, apologize to the Turkish people for the killings and compensate the losses incurred by the families of the victims and those who were injured. This is still where we stand. Until Israel heeds our call, we will not be able to put our relationship back on track.

Iran's Nuclear Program

The second issue that gave rise to criticisms of Turkish foreign policy is related to Iran's nuclear program. Turkey's policy toward Iran is not driven by cultural or religious affinity. It is determined by geopolitical realities and historical experiences. To set the record straight, Turkey is categorically against Iran's development of nuclear weapons capability. This principle is in full compliance with Turkey's policy of a nuclear-weapon free Middle East. Iran's development of a nuclear arsenal would gravely threaten peace, security and stability in our region by triggering a nuclear arms race. That is completely against our vision.

Having said that, I must also emphasize that Iran, as any other country that is party to Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), has the right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. As a neighbor of Iran we have to tread a careful and sensitive line while addressing the issue of Iran's nuclear program. Therefore we firmly believe that in order to achieve our goals with respect to Iran, engagement is the only path to follow. This position does not undermine the U.S. position. To the contrary, we are encouraging Iran to be more transparent about its nuclear plans and to address the concerns of the international community.

¹ United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, A/HCR/15/21, 27 September 2010, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/15session/A.HRC.15.21_en.pdf

To be sure, the Tehran Declaration of 17 May, which was achieved thanks to our joint efforts with the Brazilian Government, does not solve all the problems. However, we believe it offers an important opportunity for the peaceful resolution of the problem. It is with this understanding that we voted against new sanctions at the UN Security Council Resolution in June. We chose to give diplomacy a chance, while keeping the Tehran Agreement on the table. Our policy is consistent and principled. Had we supported new sanctions, this window of opportunity might have been lost. We still believe that diplomacy offers effective avenues to address this issue without further heightening the tension in the region. It is important to note that it will be Turkey that will be hit hardest by sanctions or the use of force. If we are asked to bear the burden, we should also be given a chance to engage in an effective dialogue with Iran.

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The Current Flow of Turkish - American Relations

Despite the negative perceptions created by these two issues, the Turkish-U.S. partnership continues to yield tangible results in many areas:

- In Iraq, close cooperation between our countries has been instrumental in the accomplishment of many historic milestones. The end of the combat mission of the United States, thanks to President Obama’s determined policies, is yet another important step in Iraq’s normalization process. However, military disengagement should not lead to a security vacuum in the country. The Iraqi people are going through critical times. Turkey is determined to contribute to the stabilization, democratization, and reconstruction efforts in Iraq. We firmly believe that the robust collaboration between Turkey and United States is vital to preserve Iraq’s unity and its balancing role in the region.
- In collaboration with the United States and Iraq, we are taking significant strides in our battle against the PKK terrorist organization, which is located in the northern part of Iraq. American authorities have declared the PKK as the common enemy of Turkey, the United States,

and Iraq. Iraqi Kurds are increasingly supporting our efforts to put an end to this plague which has been a stumbling block in our relations.

- In Afghanistan, Turkey is exerting its soft power to help return this country to its rightful place in the community of nations. We will continue our assistance in education, health, infrastructure, military and security sectors.
- Supporting Pakistan is another important area of cooperation between Turkey and the United States. Turkey's overall contributions to Pakistan have passed 160 million dollars, while a seasoned Turkish diplomat was recently appointed as the UN Special Envoy for Assistance to Pakistan. With our joint support he will be instrumental in supporting the people and the democratic government of Pakistan to heal their wounds in the wake of the terrible disaster caused by devastating and historic floods.

Our effort to portray a more accurate picture of Turkey in the United States and broaden bilateral relationship is one of the most important aspects of our partnership. The narrow-minded efforts of certain single-agenda ethnic lobbies are all too evident. In particular, the ill-conceived efforts of segments of the Armenian diaspora do not serve the higher and long-term interests of the United States or even of Armenia. We must work together to prevent them from harming U.S.-Turkish relations.

The events of 1915 constitute a tragic chapter in the common history of the Turks and Armenians who lived together in peace for centuries. To determine what really has happened, the Turkish Government, with the unanimous support of its Parliament, has offered to the Armenians to establish together a Joint Commission of Historians. We have opened all our archives to the historians, and we expect the same from all the relevant parties. Turkey has no difficulties in facing her own history. In the meantime, the protocols signed between Turkey and Armenia on 10 October 2009 to normalize our relationship represents a historic opportunity for both countries. Turkey remains committed to the protocols. However, we would like to see a comprehensive peace take hold in the region, and we will work very diligently to achieve this end.

Turkish-American relations have withstood the test of time. We overcame one of the biggest challenges to the relationship in 2003, when the Turkish Parliament voted against allowing U.S. military to enter Iraq through Turkey. In a relatively short period of time, Turkey and the U.S. have revitalized their strategic partnership, in large part because of a strong foundation. Methodological differences on

certain issues do not undermine our shared principles. Time and again, our dedication to uphold democracy, strengthen human rights, and expand free markets have deepened the strategic nature of this relationship. Shared goals and interests have always prevailed over differences.

We cannot allow variances in methods and approaches to distract attention from our joint quest to build a better, safer, and more prosperous world. Our determination to further enhance the strategic partnership between our countries that will lead us to a brighter future remains unshaken. Turkey and the United States complement each other. We cannot and should not accept failure, as failure is not an option.