

TURKISH-US RELATIONS: CONVERGENCE OR DIVERGENCE?

Currently, the US is the sole superpower and 9/11 has created a new global struggle, defined by the US, in which freedom and democracy confront dictatorship and terror. Taking this environment as a given, the author believes Turkey should have made it a priority to be a reliable partner to the US in the past few years and questions the capability of the current government. The author also underlines the value of Turkey's relationship with Israel and puts public opinion in perspective, explaining that many of the sentiments today are conjectural, suggesting that the public can be led to conceive the changes taking place with more clarity and vision. Taking change as an inevitable factor in today's world, Kesici argues that Turkey is well positioned to play an active role in the Greater Middle East initiative of the US.

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It is often claimed that there is no place for friendship in the field of international relations; countries only have mutual interests. It sounds realistic, but not wise. In politics, reality alone is no more than the aggregation of brute facts to be evaluated and reshaped. It is wisdom which gives politics its ultimate meaning in the effort to create a better world for our countries. Handling of international relations requires not only a better understanding of multi-dimensional social and political realities, but also better understanding of different societies with different cultures and histories. The history of relations between countries, and good or bad memories of each other have their impact on current and future affairs. In this respect, the history of the US-Turkish relations is qualified to be called a “friendship.” But, we all know that friendship is like “fine china.” When broken, it can be mended or fixed, but cracks remain.

Turkey and the US share a wide range of common values: democracy, free market economy, separation of church/mosque and state, freedom of worship, and human rights. And, this friendship gives us a great opportunity to improve peace and stability in our region. But after 50 years of cold war period, it has become necessary to develop a new perspective for Turkish-US relations.

Over the past 50 years, the US needed Turkey, primarily to contain the USSR, and then Iraq. Now, these two countries are no longer a threat. Still, I believe Turkey remains a strategic country. As for Turkey, the US remains a global and historical ally and friend. Since all national issues also have international significance, Turkey needs this great ally as a friend in every respect of its political life. Indeed, we are good friends. Our people have good memories of each other. Turkey is capable of playing a key role in the process of democratization and in creating the conditions for peace and stability in this region. This is not to say that the relations between the USA and Turkey have always been free from problems and immune from tension. Nevertheless, the last 50 years of close bilateral relations and the institutional NATO alliance have proved the level of mutual trust and cooperation of these two countries to be firm enough to handle tensions and to survive challenges.

The most important feature of an alliance is that it is based on the absolute reliability of the partners support for one another. Economic benefit cannot and should not be the reason or the main component of an alliance. It should only be one of the benefits of that partnership. Our new world rests on order more than ever, since global network is tight and complicated in this age. Disorder has always been a danger for societies but now this danger is more alarming since the level of technology and communication enables even the single individual to give great harm to innocent people in every corner of the world.

History has always been constructed and directed by “political might,” and this power derives from the proper reading of the historical process. The most significant outcome of this reading is that the old world is rapidly collapsing, and a new world is rising on the horizon with the same speed. The world has gone through major changes in the 21st century as stated by leading politicians, academics and analysts. After the Cold War era, we are living under different rules and conditions. 9/11 was the turning point of the New Era: The New World Order. It has changed the power balances of the world, the minds of thinkers, and the position of the Nations.

Today, we live under the dominance of a superpower, the United States of America. In this new order, concepts of “democracy and freedom” are destined to replace the vocabulary of tyrannies and dictatorships. The future world of politics will be one of civil democratic values and freedoms. It is time for all of us to decide whether to take part in the new order or not. So far, unfortunately, humanity has suffered a lot from intolerance among nations, races, and religions. Unfortunately, a more difficult situation has emerged: the politics of “international terrorism.”

After 9/11, the US and the whole world witnessed the consequences of international terrorism. The duty of the whole world was to confront this terror and its supporters, once and for all. It became urgent to find ways to overcome this new enmity and confrontation. Predictably, the US took the lead. It was a great responsibility and challenge. No one, or no country, can do it alone. But it is unfortunate that the US failed to gain the support of the international community from the beginning. In fact, it is a failure of other parties as well. On one hand, the international community in general and some very important countries in the EU, even the most reliable partners, including Turkey, failed to give sufficient support to the US while international understanding was the most important dimension of this struggle against the global threat coming from terrorism. But on the other hand, the US failed to recognize the importance and value of international consent.

Today, from a simple perspective, what we witness is the encounter between democracy and dictatorships, conflicts between freedom and terror, order and disorder. Yet the general picture of world politics is very complicated. The domino effect is now on display as we witness the victory of the values of freedom and democracy, or rather the will of ordinary people in a new domain almost every week. It is undeniable to see the powerful effects of the domino. And it is an impressive New World Order, which is structured slowly but surely with new additions to come. There will be two main alternatives facing the existing old regimes: Either a breakdown a la Yugoslavia, meaning the creation of an ethnic and political maelstrom and isolation from the West; or a transition a la Bulgaria, the creation of pluralistic political structures, absorbing ethnic and political tensions, the creation of free market economy and strong ties with the West.

It has been only 4 years since 9/11, and we have witnessed the New Order in Afghanistan, Iraq, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Egypt, Lebanon, and even in Libya. Without further due, the long time dictator of Libya, Qaddafi, accepted the rules of the New World Order feeling very close to being ousted otherwise. In this context, Turkey benefited from these events until about the year 2000. The exportation of the head of the PKK from his shelter in Damascus and his capture ended the 15-year old terrorism and violence directed against the people of Turkey, which cost 30 thousand lives and tens of billions of US Dollars. Furthermore, Syria, Iran, North Korea, and some African and Caucasian nations are in line. Finally, the new order will affect Saudi Arabia and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The shaping of this order within four years is rather impressive however you look at it, considering that the passage from the Second World War to the Cold War years took about a decade.

Although the cooperation on the Iraqi issue is urgent and critical, the future of the US-Turkish relations is much more comprehensive than the Iraqi issue. The region we will deal with is currently called the “Greater Middle East”- the region from Central North Africa to the Caspian Basin, and Central Asia. Turkey is a perfect partner for the US and the international community, being the best functioning secular democracy with a free market economy in the Middle East, and

in the Muslim world. Its history of being almost the sole example of a lasting democratic experience in the Muslim world and its recently troubled but dynamic economy is the best tool to fulfill this objective. The friendship between Turkey and the world's only superpower, the US, is a great opportunity to establish favorable relations between the Greater Middle East countries and the West. But high hopes for a pivotal Turkish role in a "new" Middle East faced some problems and tension when Ankara failed to give full support to the Bush Administration in the war against Saddam Hussein. The rejection of the resolution of March 1, 2003, the day the Turkish Parliament voted against allowing the US ground troops to enter Turkey on their way into Iraq, was a real catastrophe. Many said this rejection was a success for democracy and expressed the will of the people, particularly in the circles of the ruling party and within the government.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) Government says: "we have more than enough majority in the Parliament, and the EU reforms will pass without incident" with regard to the government's politics on the EU. Indeed, the government has aggressively pushed various EU reform packages over the past years. The AKP leadership made sure that its deputies voted in favor of these packages and did not allow any room for opposition within its ranks. Yet, in the case of Iraq, when it came to a resolution concerning relations with the US, the government could not expose the determination of its EU politics. In this case, the outcome was justified as the outcome of the expression of parliamentary democracy.

It seems that US views this either as an expression of hypocrisy or inconsistency on behalf of the present government. In either case, it is a serious problem since in the former case the government seems insincere, and in the latter, it expresses inexperience. As a Turkish politician who is in opposition with the present government in many ways, I nevertheless wish that the US would perceive the problem more mildly and express it in more optimistic terms.

For the last 2 years, US-Turkish relations have been chilly at best. American-Turkish relations are too important to deteriorate further; the relationship needs very much to be repaired. The policies of the two countries have diverged more than ever before in history. This can not be a "don't worry, be happy" case. Democracies are not immune from disagreements. This is a testament to the maturity of both the American democracy and the Turkish democracy that Americans and Turks at all different levels are trying to work out their misunderstandings and differences through dialogues and diplomacy. We shall overcome all difficulties through cooperation rather than confrontation. The solution of these problems is only a matter of time.

There are dates in nation's histories which are the starting points of rise and fall. Unfortunately, March 1, 2003 will be remembered as the beginning of an unfortunate period for Turkey, particularly in international relations. It has been argued that the government, and particularly the prime minister himself, after making promises and giving guarantees and high hopes to the US, about being with them in the war against terror, failed to pass the resolution to allow US troops to transfer from Turkey to Iraq. By failing to pass the resolution, Turkey also failed the US-Turkish close partnership which had been so strong for the last 50 years.

All conflicts between the US and Turkey since then occurred due to the failure of the resolution on March 1st. Had Turkey succeeded in passing the resolution, none of the conflicts would have occurred, neither the very unfortunate event on July 4th, 2003 when the Turkish military team in Sulaymaniya was detained by American soldiers, nor the problematic relations with the Kurdish

leaders of Iraq, nor the prevailing the PKK problem in Northern Iraq.

Without causing more damage to Turkey and the US-Turkey relations, common sense on both sides must attend to the relationship without any delay. In doing so, we must ask the following and similar questions to ourselves until we get proper answers and explanations: Was it a fault indeed? If so, whose fault was it? Who should we bill this very historic mistake to? What did Turkey lose, and will it lose more in the years ahead? Were there any mistakes of the US, and, if so, what were they? Who is the main address of these questions? It is obviously the Turkish government, namely the AKP government. However, other institutions of the State may also be considered as not having taken a responsible lead. In the case of majority governments, it is the government which has the basic responsibility. Still, despite all my political objections to the ruling party and government, as a Turk who values his country and its most important ally, it should be remembered that the picture of world politics is so complicated that swings such as the one that took place in Turkey should be tolerated up to a certain level. Public opinion is not in a position to conceive the realities of the new world order. Turkey is not the only case. It takes time to revise the thinking habits of people. We may easily confront authoritarian regimes while people can not easily define authoritarianism.

It may be the case that, the AKP Government could not calculate the consequences of failing to pass the resolution due to their inexperience in governance and international relations. The party may still suffer from the habits of thinking coming from their rather marginal view of politics in past. If this is the case, of course it is a major problem. The last thing we want to see in this region is surrender to permanent enmity, civil strife, the rise of fundamentalism, and political instability. The Iraqi issue previously represented all of the above. After the removal of a brutal and hostile dictator in Iraq, the US sees its duty to promote modern democratic values as a precondition of world peace and stability.

The US has a history of good relations with many Muslim countries with different forms of government. It has become very clear that world order, peace and democratic tolerance of different cultures can only be sustained by the interaction of democratic regimes. Religious fundamentalism and ethnic nationalism are always threats to democracy in any country.

From the Turkish-Iraqi perspective, after the Turkish National Assembly voted against allowing US ground troops to cross Turkey on their way into Iraq, some argued that the Iraqi Kurds proved to be better allies for the US than Turks; and will soon replace Turkey as political partners for the US. First of all, I do not think that good relations between the US and Iraqi Kurds should necessarily be in opposition to the interests of Turkey. Turkey is the best potential ally for the Iraqi Kurds if they are able and capable of seeing the whole picture and the future.

Secondly, to be frank, I never believed that such a great power like the US would engage in a "short-term power game" rather than considering the possibility of long term stability and cooperation in the region. Finally, I think the partnership between the US and Turkey cannot easily be severely damaged since it is an alliance based on common principles: an uncompromising commitment to democracy, secularism, freedom, human rights, and traditional friendship. All of those who will benefit from peace and stability in this region should unite in their efforts to reach this goal, including Turks, Arabs, and Iraqi Kurds, Turkomans and other minorities who have lived here together for centuries.

Turkey is not only the best functioning democracy in the Islamic world, but has inherited the sophisticated and tolerant Ottoman interpretation of Islam and the Ottoman experience of multiculturalism. Turkey faced modernization two hundred years ago and managed to adjust its institutions and values to modern life more than many other non-Western countries, let alone other Muslim societies. That's why its understanding of religion is tolerant and moderate; its social life in general is definitely modern. Turkey, now, intends to improve its democracy to adjust to demands for additional religious and ethnic diversity. This will improve Turkey's ability to support the US in dealing with other Muslim nations. A major difference of understanding between Turkey and other Muslim states is that some use Islam as the glue to keep their nation together. As Prof. Bernard Lewis has said: "Muslims, however, tend to see not a nation subdivided into religious groups; but a religion subdivided into nations." Turkey's perspective is different.

The US really has two major strategic partners - Israel and the United Kingdom. However, on the issue of Israel, the US and the UK may have different agendas from time to time. There will not be peace in the Middle East, unless Israel has secure borders, and that is a major target of US foreign diplomacy, and particularly of this Administration. Turkey is fortunate not to have any popular historical hostility towards Israel. And, if Turkey plays her cards right, Turkey will be a major mediator in this initiative, joining her forces with Israel to become a regional power in this part of the world. Therefore, Turkey and Israel must have a strong alliance to support US efforts in democratizing the region.

Turkey-EU relations have major importance. Turkey has historically chosen its direction as a Western democracy, and part of the Western world. This direction has always been one of the basic pillars of the Turkish Republic. Nevertheless, rapid global developments require assurance and reconfirmation of old political and economic ties, and formation of new ways of collaboration and cooperation. But, so far, unfortunately, the EU has not treated Turkey on an equal footing with the Central and Eastern European countries on the issue of membership in the EU. Besides, NAFTA may become the new world market replacing the financial and economic power of the European Union. The IMF and the World Bank may be the new financial powers of the new world.

In the early nineties, we considered the rise of Islamism or religious fundamentalism as a political current, a threat to the indispensable values of secularism and democracy; and we were determined to protect Turkey from such an intrusion. In fact, political Islamism has been smoothly transferred to the politics of the present governing party, the AKP, which defines itself as conservative rather than Islamist. I am not one of those who think that they are hypocrites. I am critical of the present government for other reasons: for their inexperience, and lack of skill to understand events in the world and govern such an important country during such challenging times. The very strong Islamist history of the majority of the members of the governing party is a real problem not because of their hypocrisy or "hidden agenda" as some claim; however, coming from a marginal and radical political background, the governing party retains the habit of perceiving politics in a rather simplistic way. This habit hinders the government and members of the parliament from comprehending and managing Turkey's situation properly. In addition, the question of legitimacy seriously damages the smooth functioning of democracy.

The coordination and the cooperation of various branches of constitutional institutions and the executive are inevitably affected by the political background of the governing party. There is a huge difference between the fundamentalist mind-set and governance. This is not a question of sincerity on behalf of the ruling party; but their credibility, and capability to govern the country. Ankara must now step up to the plate and play a more active role in shaping the new Greater Middle East. This would multiply America's capacity to transform this region.

Speaking of the Greater Middle East, Turkey and Israel are the only two democratic countries in the region with open societies. The Turkish-Israeli partnership is a valuable asset for US strategic thinking in shaping the new Greater Middle East. Peace between Israelis and Palestinians is an urgent problem. Undoubtedly, Israel and the security of Israel play a major role in the New Order. The Turkish public and the Turkish state have never been anti-American, anti-West, or anti-Israel. However, an unbelievable and very irrational anti-Americanism prevails in Turkey at this time. If left to brew, anti-Americanism could lay deep roots in Turkey.

However, if this were permanent, if a generation of Turks were developing anti-American ideas that would endure a change in circumstances, we would be deeply concerned. Persuading the general public in international affairs in this new era is as important as military operations themselves. This is what I call "public diplomacy" and "leadership," particularly in hard times. I would like to wrap up with the words of a great leader from the last century, Sir Winston Churchill: "Out of intense complexities, plain simple truths emerge." This is a time of intense complexity for the world as well as for US-Turkish relations. Ultimately, we all are looking for peace and prosperity for our countries and our region. I remain hopeful that a stronger partnership will emerge simply and truthfully.