

THE INCOMING OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKEY

In order to prepare for a new chapter in Turkish-American relations, it is essential to assess the incoming Obama Administration and to objectively analyze the implications for Turkey. The selection of the new Obama cabinet reveals a great deal concerning indications of the main people and policies that will come to drive and define Turkish-American relations. As the preliminary signs from the incoming Obama Administration suggest, Turkey will only benefit from the pronounced background on Turkish issues among Obama's main security decision-makers. Most significantly, the broader opportunity for a fresh start in Turkish-U.S. relations will only be bolstered by the Obama team's recognition of Turkey's geopolitical role as a rising regional power.

Richard Giragosian*



* The author is an analyst specializing in international relations, with a focus on economics, security and political developments in the former Soviet Union, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region. He is a regular contributor to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) publications and is a contributing analyst for the London-based Jane's Information Group, covering political, economic and security issues in the South Caucasus, Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific region.

After eight years of the Bush presidency, many Americans are anxious for a serious and sweeping change in direction for their country. As president-elect Obama prepares to assume the presidency on 20 January 2009, many people in Turkey are also seeking to open a new chapter in Turkish-American relations.

The imperative for a fresh start in relations between Ankara and Washington is most clearly demonstrated by the deterioration in bilateral relations during the Bush years, ranging from a crisis of confidence on both sides to a sudden rise in vibrant anti-Americanism. Each of these factors can be traced to the war in Iraq, as a part of only a broader Bush policy of unilateral disdain for America's main allies and strategic partners.

In light of such a rise in Turkish-American tension and misunderstanding over the past eight years, the need for both sides to forge a new relationship, based on mutual respect and a recognition of each country's strategic interests, is more than apparent.

The Need to Reassure Turkey

Yet there was a degree of concern over the election of Obama as the next U.S. president, at least within some circles in Turkey. That concern, of course, was rooted more in his rather strong pro-Armenian statements during the presidential campaign, and most notably his public support for Armenian efforts for genocide recognition.

But such campaign statements were neither particularly new nor especially noteworthy, reflecting the political considerations facing every American candidate for national office. Such political posturing does not, and should not, be assumed to indicate any substantial shift in U.S. policy, however. Nevertheless, Turkish concern over such a stance was real and, compared to past campaign statements, the effect of Obama's public endorsement of the Armenian genocide issue was exacerbated by the already tense relationship between Turkey and the United States.

The powerful effect of the Turkish perception of the pro-Armenian bias of Obama is also a factor that must be noted and duly corrected quickly, even before the president-elect takes office. Obama can easily contain the damaging effect of the Armenian genocide issue on Turkish-U.S. relations by leaving the issue to Congress and arguing that U.S. national security necessitates a more pronounced course correction – away from the passionate language of a candidate, and closer to the sober and more reasoned consideration of a president.

An additional Turkish concern, related to the same pro-Armenian perception, arose with Obama's choice of Joe Biden as his vice president. Although Turkey has consistently blocked efforts by the so-called Armenian lobby to garner U.S. Congressional recognition and reaffirmation of genocide claims, a wiser policy for Ankara to pursue with the incoming Obama administration would be to emphasize and advocate a broader, more comprehensive policy well beyond the genocide issue. According to Turkish analyst Sami Kohen, for example, the Armenian issue should "not be the sole focus" of Turkey's engagement with the new American leadership, but Ankara should seize "an opportunity for Turkey to bring new strategic input to the relationship."

Thus, in order to more prudently prepare for a new chapter in Turkish-American relations, it is essential to assess the incoming Obama administration and to objectively analyze the implications for Turkey. Although little can truly be learned from evaluating Obama himself, due to his short and limited record in the U.S. Senate, the selection of the new Obama cabinet reveals a great deal concerning indications of the main people and policies that will come to drive and define Turkish-American relations.

Choosing a Cabinet

As a first-time candidate for national office, one of the most impressive defining features of the Obama presidential campaign was its discipline and organization, reflecting a new sense of professionalism and experience among key campaign staff and advisers. Similarly, the Obama campaign team was determined to avoid many of the early mistakes of the last Democratic presidency, in order to not only distance themselves from the rival Hillary Clinton campaign but to also demonstrate to voters that the Obama campaign offered much more than a mere return to the policies of former President Bill Clinton.

Senior Obama advisers, led by the head of the Obama transition team, John Podesta, the former chief of staff for President Clinton, were intent to avoid early the mistakes and disorganization that came to mark the early days of the first Clinton administration. Such determination has been evident in the weeks following the November election and is equally evident in the daily work of the transition team as the January inauguration approaches.

The most significant example has been president-elect Obama's commitment to receiving daily security briefings from Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials, aimed at providing him with a deep background understanding of key trends and issues, as well as giving him a more current review of significant developments. While such CIA briefings are not unusual for new presidents

during the transition period from election to office, what is significant in this case is that Obama receives more classified daily briefings than current President Bush, who prefers them less often and reads background materials even less frequently.

The course of choosing a cabinet is a difficult challenge for any new president. The hardest part in selecting cabinet officials lies in the need to balance a desire for policy expertise and proven experience against the temptation for political expediency in rewarding key campaign supporters with cabinet-level promotions.

For president-elect Obama, however, the nearly completed task of choosing his cabinet was marked by an interesting combination of both, with his appointment of James Jones as his nominee for national security adviser, a man that he barely knew before, offset by the decision to name his former rival, Hillary Clinton, as his designated secretary of state.

The New Team

In a series of well-staged and well-staggered announcements, the president-elect unveiled his new cabinet nominees over the past several weeks. For Turkey, there are a number of important considerations and expectations from the next American government. Obviously, nearly all of the incoming U.S. officials will exert some degree of influence over a wide range of issues of importance to Turkey, ranging from textile quotas to international energy. But the new national security team will be the most essential determinant for repairing the strained Turkish-U.S. relationship.

One of the more surprising cabinet choices featured the selection of nominees for three key positions: former presidential contender Hillary Rodham Clinton as his nominee for secretary of state, former NATO commander and retired Marine Corps General James Jones as the designated national security adviser, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who despite his Republican party credentials, would remain in the Pentagon post under President Obama.

Fortunately, Obama's selection of a new top-tier national security team sends a reassuring message to Turkey, as each of the three designates already holds extensive knowledge and experience in Turkish-Armenian relations. During his public announcement of the future Clinton role, the president-elect explained that his choice of Hillary Clinton as his secretary of state was "a sign to friend and foe of the seriousness of my commitment to renew American diplomacy and restore our alliances." Such a focus on a return to multilateral diplomacy and a

commitment to restoring the integrity of America's alliances offers Turkey fresh hope for a more balanced relationship based more on parity and respect.

While Clinton brings vast experience, close contacts and a deep understanding of Turkey to the post, both Gates and General Jones have extensive personal connections to the Turkish armed forces. Gates values Turkey's role within the NATO alliance but also sees a greater and even more important future role for Turkey in two areas: as a balancing force in the Middle East, to counter Iran and to help mediate between Syria and Israel, and as an even more active contributor to operations to stabilize Afghanistan, which is an already well-known priority for Obama. And for his part, General Jones also seeks to pursue a reinvigorated partnership with Turkey, beyond the confines of NATO and based on mutually reinforcing goals for stability and security.

Conclusion

As the preliminary signs from the incoming Obama administration suggest, Turkey will only benefit from the pronounced background on Turkish issues among Obama's main security decision-makers. Most significantly, the broader opportunity for a fresh start in Turkish-U.S. relations will be only bolstered by the Obama team's recognition of Turkey's geopolitical role as a rising regional power.

Thus, the composition of the next U.S. cabinet also offers Turkish leaders with the return of several well-known old friends, now in new positions of influence. The burden for improving relations will not be limited to new officials in Washington, however, but will also need to be shared by leaders in Ankara. And that necessitates that Turkey accept the hand of friendship already being extended by president-elect Obama.