

Obama's Turkey Policy: Bringing Credibility to “Strategic Partnership”

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ABSTRACT

Under the Obama administration American foreign policy will be engaged in genuine coalition building with allies. Such a return to multilateralism will have a positive impact on transatlantic and Turkish-American relations. Just like under the Clinton presidency during the late 1990s, Turkey needs American support to undo the deadlock with the European Union. America's return to Middle East diplomacy will also improve Turkish-American relations since the Obama administration is much more likely to support Ankara's openings to Damascus. Turkey should make an effort to host a new Arab-Israeli peace process in the framework of an international conference in Istanbul. In the short run Ankara can avoid problems with Washington on the Armenian issue if it decides to enhance its military and civilian support to NATO forces in Afghanistan.

In American foreign policy the urgent often trumps the important. Burdened with global responsibilities, high-level American policy-makers are almost always engaged in either “crisis management” or “damage control.” This is perhaps why Turkey rarely and thankfully almost never makes it to the top of first priority items. As former ambassador to Turkey, Morton Abramowitz recently wrote: “Turkey poses no security threat to the United States compared to the situation in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Russia in and around the Caucasus. Turkey is not a key player like the European Union, Japan and China in dealing with the international financial debacle. It's not an energy exporter like Saudi Arabia. It does not harbor terrorists who want to strike the United States, and it is not a proliferation risk like Pakistan and North Korea. In short, Turkey does not make headlines in The New York Times or on CNN.”

The downside of not being problematic is

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not being on the agenda. In fact, American policy-makers think of Turkey only when they need support with something urgent, or in the context of a regional crisis. In that sense, there is simply no clear-cut and well-thought-out American strategy to deal with Turkey. Under such circumstances, Turkey's potential role often comes as an "afterthought."

Washington's Turkey policy is a "derivative" of other more pressing regional problems and priorities. And "typically, when we need something from Ankara, we need it right now" points out Mark Parris, another former ambassador to Turkey. Add to this the fact that Turkey often falls between the cracks in the European versus Middle East bureaucratic division of the State Department and the Pentagon. The result is a crucial ally of the United States that is consistently neglected.

Is this situation likely to change with the Obama administration? The short answer is "probably not." Given the unprecedented scale of the global financial crisis and the wide array of foreign policy nightmares awaiting Washington, the new administration may even end up having less time to think strategically about Turkish-American relations. Yet this is not the whole story. It would be unfair to argue that under Obama, Turkish – American relations will face more of the same. Turkey may still end up getting less attention than it deserves. But the Obama administration is likely to be very different from its immediate predecessor in one key aspect: a genuine preference for multilateralism. This will count for a lot because most of the problems faced by the Bush administration were products of unilateralism and mind-boggling incompetence.

In fact, the motto of US foreign policy over the last eight years often seemed to be "unilaterally if we can, multilaterally if we must." Under Obama, however, American foreign policy is likely to revisit the 1990s, when the motto was "multilaterally if we can, unilaterally if we must." Needless to say, the latter approach strongly contributed to the positive image of the United States under the two Clinton administrations. Although Obama will seek to restore America's lost sense of moral authority and political legitimacy, there will always be limits to American multilateralism. If necessary, Washington will continue to act alone. But it's the little things that will make a big difference. Just shutting down Guantanamo and changing the approach to the Kyoto Protocol will be symbolic gestures reminding Europeans that America shares the same planet with them. In turn, this change

in transatlantic atmospherics will make it much easier for Washington to forge a better partnership with key allies such as Germany and France.

Such improvement in transatlantic relations is good news for Turkey for a number of reasons. The most obvious one is the positive impact on Turkey-EU relations. The logic is simple: Washington has always been a strong and vocal supporter of Turkey's European vocation. Therefore, the better America's image in Europe the better it is for Turkey. But not all American administrations are the same. When America is globally popular, European leaders and, more importantly, their public opinion, tends to listen. It is certainly true that too much American meddling in European affairs tends to backfire. President Obama is likely to have a major impact on Europe. One had to just watch the 200,000 Germans who showed up to hear "candidate" Obama speak last summer in Berlin. Imagine the impact of a major policy speech delivered by Obama in Paris or Berlin about the need for Europe to embrace Turkey. Along similar lines, a presidential speech underlining the need to fight Islamophobia and racism in Europe would go a long way in terms of American efforts to promote a multicultural Europe where Turkey is a proud member of the union.

In short, when America is popular, Europeans will listen. President Clinton illustrated this point when his lobbying on Turkey's behalf in the late 1990s played a crucial role in reversing the exclusion of Turkey from the enlargement process with the 1999 Helsinki summit. When we think of Obama, we need to remember the popularity of the Clinton administration and the serious American efforts to put Turkey back on track for the enlargement process between 1997 and 1999. The same may happen again.

Beyond such important factors, it is also crucial to have Washington and Brussels on the same page when it comes to democratization in Turkey. Nothing can be more harmful than mixed messages coming from the West in the event Turkey's process of democratization is derailed by potential military or judicial intervention. The Bush administration was much slower and hesitant than the EU in defending democratic principles during the military memorandum in April 2007 and the judicial "coup" the following year. This not only further damaged the democratic and moral authority of the United States but also created the very dangerous impression in the eyes of coup plotters that the US would be more "pragmatic" in dealing with Turkey than the EU. Under the Obama administration such discord between the EU and the US will hopefully be left behind, and a more principled approach will characterize the transatlantic agenda toward Turkey's democratization.

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In addition to better transatlantic relations, another area where the Obama administration's new approach is likely to benefit Turkey is the Middle East. Unlike the Bush administration, Obama has indicated willingness to engage in serious diplomacy in three major areas: the Arab-Israeli peace process, relations

with Iran and engagement with Syria. In all of these three areas Ankara and the new leadership in Washington see eye-to-eye. In fact, Turkey was an early proponent of engagement with Syria and Iran, at a time when the Bush administration insisted on isolation. Turkey's much-improved soft power in the Middle East under the AKP may even turn into a diplomatic asset for the Obama administration in areas such as facilitating dialogue with Damascus, Tehran and Hamas.

As far as the Arab-Israeli peace process is concerned, the Obama administration is likely to recognize that all problems in the Middle East are interconnected. The Arab-Israeli peace process can simply not progress without taking into consideration the isolation of Iran and the fragile dynamics in Iraq. This is why, under the Obama administration, the Middle East peace process will need a multilateral jumpstart with an international conference that will bring together all major actors in the region, including Iran and Turkey, in addition to the Quartet, which already includes the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States.

The AKP should make clear to Washington that Istanbul offers the best venue for such a summit. Turkish diplomacy has already made substantial inroads in terms of mediating between Israel and Syria. The Turkish government has also expressed willingness to mediate between Iran and the United States. Just like the 1990s were characterized by the Oslo peace process, the next era of diplomacy and cooperation in the Middle East can be launched with a summit in Istanbul and the "Istanbul peace process." Such an effort would amount to a paradigmatic change in Turkish-American relations – bringing much-needed credibility to the strategic partnership.

It is no secret that other major Muslim countries in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, would not be extremely pleased to see Turkey become such a main actor in the Middle East peace process. The issue is particularly sensitive for Egypt since President Mubarak has a tendency to see the peace process as his country's political turf and geostrategic relevance in the Arab world. In short, Turkey will have to compete for such a role. In the good old tradition of



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realpolitik, this may even require engaging some quid pro quo for Washington’s blessing. A realistic approach on the part of Ankara would start with the identification of a major issue for Washington and try to gain leverage by offering to help.

Afghanistan may provide such an opportunity for Ankara. During his electoral campaign Obama signaled that Afghanistan, and increasingly Pakistan, should become the center of gravity of America’s fight against terrorism. It is expected that this region will trump Iraq as the foremost priority of US foreign policy under the Obama administration. Given the likely focus on Afghanistan of the new US administration and Turkey’s ability to provide much-needed help in the social and economic development of this war-torn country, Afghanistan has the potential of constituting a strong pillar of future Turkey-US collaboration, provided that an important condition is fulfilled.

NATO forces are in urgent need of more manpower in Afghanistan. Washington has been desperately asking for more help. It may very well be that the tone of the relationship between the Obama administration and its allies will be determined by individual contributions to Afghanistan. Turkey is in a unique position in terms of its current contributions and political prestige in Afghanistan. Turkey’s relations with Afghanistan date back to the 1930s, when Ataturk’s Tur-

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key provided assistance to Afghan leaders in their initial state-building efforts. Following the US intervention in 2002, Turkey contributed to the security effort by twice assuming the leadership of the ISAF force. Turkey currently has 700 troops in and around Kabul.

In 2006 Turkish forces assumed the management and operation of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the district of Vardak, west of Kabul. Training of the local police and the provision of health and educational services have been the main activities of the Turkish PRT. The Turkish PRT has been instrumental in the establishment of 12 schools and a police education and training center as well as a model police station, two schools for girls and two vocational schools. Lastly, Turkey recently pledged \$200 million for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Since Turkey enjoys a good standing within Afghan society, the 130-strong Turkish PRT acts and operates in a predominantly non-hostile environment. So far there has been only a single armed attack against Turkish personnel and no casualties. Also unlike many other PRTs, the Turkish PRT is under civilian control. Therefore, its work agenda is determined by its civilian component and in relation to local development needs, and not by military or security concerns.

Another crucial area where Turkey's efforts are important for Washington is Ankara's ability to bring Afghanistan and Pakistan together. Turkey's excellent relations with both Pakistan and Afghanistan allowed Ankara to host in December 2008 a meeting between Presidents Zardari and Karzai to discuss security and economic cooperation, with a particular focus on cross-border energy cooperation between the Orakzai region in FATA and the neighboring region in Afghanistan, as well as organizing tripartite seminars on prevention strategies for poppy cultivation and drug trafficking. In 2008 more than 50 Afghan law enforcement officials attended drugs trafficking prevention seminars at the Turkish Police Academy. Turkey has shown that it can provide valuable assistance to the much-needed objective of local capacity-building, which will become the yardstick for the eventual disengagement of the international community from this region.

Those are important efforts. Yet, Turkey can certainly do more. In 2009 Ankara should consider expanding its civilian and military presence in Afghanistan to gain more leverage with the Obama administration on a number of fronts. Although it

is essentially Turkey's soft power rather than its ability to deliver more fighting troops that should provide the basis for a stronger Turkish commitment to peace and stability in Afghanistan, Ankara should also consider sending just a few hundred more troops to Afghanistan in order to increase its bargaining power with Washington. In a world of

realpolitik, Turkey cannot be expected to put America's global interests over its own regional interests. But Turkish officials should also know that the more Ankara contributes to Afghanistan, the more it will be listened to in Washington.

Sending more troops to Afghanistan, in addition to ramping up civilian PRT efforts, is likely to bring Ankara much-needed political capital in Washington in the following areas: finding support for a major role in the Middle East Peace process, the resolution of the Kirkuk question in accordance with Turkish sensitivities and continued intelligence and military cooperation against the PKK. One can even envision a situation in which the United States may end up reconsidering the nature of its north Cyprus policy in the event Turkey were to decide to shift a very small fraction of its inactive 30,000-strong troop presence on the island towards a more important NATO mission in Afghanistan. Such a Turkish policy would also score high points with the European Union, particularly with countries such as Germany and France who themselves would also be asked to contribute more to Afghanistan.

The earlier Ankara decides to step up its contributions to the NATO presence in Afghanistan the better it will be in terms of finding a receptive ear in Washington for yet another major Turkish concern: the Armenian genocide resolution. Obama's position on this issue is well known; however, it is also clear that Washington will be unlikely to antagonize a truly strategic partner that has stepped up its cooperation with the US in the above described manner. In other words, Ankara's increased cooperation with Washington in Afghanistan will also pay off on the Armenian resolution front. Another factor that will strengthen Turkey's hand in Washington regarding the prevention of a genocide resolution or a presidential statement on April 24 is the much-welcomed emergence of a genuine debate in Turkish society about the Armenian question. In that sense, the public petition campaign apologizing for the tragedy of 1915 with the signature of tens of thousands Turkish citizens is a step in the right direction. The campaign provides

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much-needed ammunition to the pro-Turkish camp in Washington, which argues that a genocide resolution at such a critical juncture would be counterproductive for the evolution of the debate in Turkish society.

With such a loaded agenda Ankara and Washington will need to develop better understanding of each other's perspectives and objectives. Let us not forget that the initial political rift between Turkey and the US on Iraq stemmed from the inability of the US, prior to the military intervention, to explain to and convince the Turkish side about its exit strategy from that country. The same mistake should not be repeated in Afghanistan. In other words, the scope of Turkey's contributions to the stabilization efforts in Afghanistan will depend on the ability of the US, as the leading actor in the region, to define, articulate and reach consensus with its partners about the endgame in Afghanistan. The Obama administration should clearly define its objectives and strategies in order to be in a position to request and receive all the support its NATO allies, and in particular Turkey, can deliver. In that sense, as Soli Ozel argues: "it is also imperative that rather than just asking Turkey to cooperate with the United States on policies singularly determined in Washington, an effort should be made to devise policies in a more collaborative fashion. Turkey's myriad connections from Russia to Iran ought to be taken into consideration before Ankara is asked to participate in policies that might harm its vital interests."

Finally, let's conclude with a point about Iraq. The Obama administration should encourage and support the recent momentum in improved relations between Ankara and Arbil. Turkey has taken begrudging but genuine steps towards recognizing the Kurdish Regional Government. The chances are high that economic and political relations between Ankara and Arbil will significantly improve in the near future. Yet, such progress is contingent upon the isolation and eventual elimination of the PKK in northern Iraq and stability in Kirkuk within the current framework of a special status. Any deterioration of the security situation in Turkey in the event of PKK attacks will poison relations between Ankara and Arbil. Such a negative turn of events has the potential to fatally complicate the Obama administration's exit strategy from the country.

For all the reasons and factors described in this commentary, the Obama administration needs to pay attention to the high stakes involved in relations with

Turkey. To improve the relevance of Turkey in Washington, American public opinion should be regularly reminded that with some 75 million Muslims, Turkey is the most advanced democracy in the Islamic world. It has borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Iran, Iraq and Syria. It is the corridor through which the vast energy reserves of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia will pass to the West — the only alternative being Iran. A stable, Western-oriented, liberal Turkey on a clear path toward the EU would serve as a growing market for Western goods, a contributor of the labor force Europe will desperately need, a democratic example for the rest of the Muslim world, a stabilizing influence on Iraq, a partner in Afghanistan and a critical ally in the war on terrorism —not a bad list of attributes. A resentful, unstable and protectionist Turkey, on the other hand, would be the opposite in every case.