

# Common Values and Common Interests? The Bush Legacy in US-Turkish Relations

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### ABSTRACT

American and Turkish leaders typically describe ties between the U.S. and Turkey as based on “common values and interests.” Yet given that the Bush administration’s relationship with Turkey has been marked by dysfunction and crisis, is that still true? A tendency to see Turkey as a function of Washington’s big idea of the moment, insensitivity to a broadening perception in Turkey of U.S. disregard for Turkish interests, inaction in the face of PKK terror, weak leadership on energy security, and schizophrenia toward Turkey’s internal politics have left U.S.–Turkish relations worse than when George W. Bush came to office. If U.S. and Turkish interests remain largely convergent at the strategic level, a more independent Turkish diplomacy will likely be part of the Bush legacy. As for “common values,” there is reason to hope that the real damage done to mutual perceptions is reversible.

As the George W. Bush administration enters its final months, a review of its handling of U.S.–Turkish relations reveals two constants. On one hand the refrain, recited as an incantation on every occasion when officials of the two countries have come together, that this is a relationship based on “common values and interests.” On the other, a real-world record of chronic dysfunction, punctuated by crises and near misses.

How have the Bush years changed the U.S.–Turkish relationship? Does it, in fact, still reflect common values and interests? What challenges await Bush’s successor in “getting Turkey right”?

### Worse Than He Found It

There is no escaping the bottom line. George W. Bush leaves U.S. relations with the Republic of Turkey worse than he found them.

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This is not meant as a partisan statement. The Bush administration did some important things right during its two terms in office. Turkey would be a different place today had not Washington moved smartly in 2001 to organize the IMF/World Bank package that checked the Turkish economy's freefall and creat-

ed the basis for its dramatic recovery. Bush's White House repeatedly showed grit in resisting the Armenian lobby's efforts to get a "genocide" resolution through Congress. Its backing of Turkey's candidacy for EU membership was exemplary. Condoleezza Rice deserves special credit for building strong personal relationships with Turkish leaders early in her tenure as Secretary of State that more than once averted bilateral crack-ups.

Nor can the Turkish side escape a degree of blame for recurrent tensions in the relationship. Some of its contributions (notably the March 1, 2003 debacle over authorizing U.S. forces to invade Iraq through Turkey and the surprise invitation in early 2005 to Hamas's military chief) seem in retrospect more a function of inexperience than ill-intent. Others (notably what appeared to be a studied series of slights throughout the winter of 2004-05 against the Bush administration) seem less benign.

At the end of the day, however, the burden of responsibility for what has been the most problematic six years in U.S.–Turkish relations since the Cyprus crises of the seventies lies with Washington. Of its sins of commission and omission, the following stand out.

**1. Exploitative Myopia.** The Bush national security team, while not the first to think of Turkey in terms of "what it can do for us," proved the most flagrant in paying attention to Ankara basically when it needed something – usually in a hurry. At times (e.g., the run-up to the Iraq war, the Russia-Georgia war) the issue was access to or through Turkey's pivotal geography. At times (e.g., the still-born Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA); a mid-2003 request for Turkish "peacekeepers" in Iraq) the issue was Turkey's unique combination of identities (Muslim, Western, secular, democratic, etc.). The common denominator was a habit of seeing Turkey as *a function of* Washington's big idea of the moment. The result was growing wariness in Ankara of associating itself too closely with American policies, which, moreover, tended to play badly on the Turkish street.

## **2. Insensitivity to Turkish Interests.**

The unpopularity of U.S. policies reflected an expanding sense in Turkey that Washington's approach more often than not was at odds with Turkey's national interests. Turks overwhelmingly opposed attacking Iraq because they feared that Turkey would pay a high price, as it had in the first Gulf War. Nothing they saw from 2003 through mid-2007 convinced them they were wrong. Initially intrigued by the BMENA initiative, they soon distanced themselves from a concept the region was quick to reject as an American effort to force Western values down Muslim throats. Convinced that Turkey's interests were best served by engagement with problematic regional players, Ankara was exasperated by Washington's sometimes public pressure to isolate them. As Russia became Turkey's biggest trading partner and loomed larger as an energy supplier, gaps emerged in Turkish and American perceptions of how to handle a range of issues, from Black Sea security, to strategic energy transport, to the 2008 Georgia crisis.

Some American observers have seen these proliferating differences on regional issues as evidence of intent by Turkey's ruling party since 2002, (the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party, known by its Turkish acronym, 'AKP' or 'AK Party') to move the country away from its traditional close relations with the West, the U.S. and Israel. This perception ignores the reality that the AKP's policies have by and large reflected a broad Turkish consensus on where the country's interests lie, including among its professional diplomats and, at times, such rock-ribbed Kemalist adversaries of the AKP as former President Ahmet Necdet Sezer. Indeed, on most of the issues in question, Turkey's secular opposition parties have tended to adopt more stridently anti-U.S. positions than the AKP.

Taken together, Washington's tendency to focus on Turkey only when it needed it, and a web of policies widely viewed in Turkey as inimical to its interests, produced a sea-change in Turkish perceptions of America. Polls since 2003, and notably a September 2008 report by the German Marshall Fund, have consistently placed the U.S. in first place among nations viewed as threatening Turkey's security.

**3. Inaction against the PKK.** Perceptions of Washington as threat rather than partner hardened over the course of a three-year impasse on how to address terror operations against Turkey mounted by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) from sanctuaries in northern Iraq. Rhetoric that "there is no place in post-Saddam Iraq"

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for groups like the PKK notwithstanding, U.S. authorities took no meaningful action after the PKK in spring 2004 ended a five year cease-fire and Turkish military and civilian casualties began to mount. While American inaction appears to have been mainly a function of bureaucratic deadlock in Washington and distraction in Iraq, it was universally

perceived in Turkey as a reflection of policy. Indeed, by late 2007, it was widely believed there that the U.S. sought to bleed and ultimately divide Turkey in order to establish an independent Kurdistan.

More than any other factor, the Bush administration's failure to respond to Turkey's calls for assistance against the PKK soured Turkish official and popular opinion toward America: the Bush administration's popular opinion numbers were in single digits as Turkey massed 100,000 troops on its border with Iraq last fall, threatening to deal with the issue unilaterally if the U.S. could or would not. George W. Bush's November 2007 decision to provide actionable intelligence against the PKK, and Washington's subsequent acquiescence in ongoing Turkish military operations in and over northern Iraq, avoided a train-wreck. But Washington's abrupt change of course raised still unanswered questions about why this had been so hard. The blow within Turkey to perceptions of American friendship and reliability has not yet healed.

**4. Weak Leadership on Energy Security.** America's failure to respond to Turkish pleas for help against the PKK was paralleled in the less emotional but strategically vital area of energy security policy. The momentum the Bush administration inherited from U.S.-Turkish successes in the late nineties in building major oil and gas pipelines from Baku to Turkey, combined with the determination of the AKP government to make Turkey a regional energy hub, should have made this issue a "no brainer" as the centerpiece for U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the opening years of a new century.

Regrettably, the Bush administration never provided the convincing leadership that would have enabled it to cash in on a strong hand. As Russia moved decisively and at the highest levels to strengthen an incipient monopoly on gas and oil exports from the former Soviet Union, the U.S. never effectively engaged above the junior policy level (i.e. Deputy Assistant Secretary). Washington's arguments were the right ones, but regional players, including Turkey, ultimately came

to doubt its ability to deliver. In the final year of the Bush administration most were moving toward accommodation with Russia (and, in the case of Turkey, with Iran).

**5. Schizophrenia on the AKP.** Years of frustration with what Ankara came to view as insensitive, incompetent or weak leadership on regional issues were compounded by the Bush administration's maladroit injection of itself – often unintentionally – into Turkey's fraught domestic politics.

Bush's foreign policy teams never quite figured out what they thought of the AKP after its 2002 election victory. The result was a tendency to oscillate between pandering to the party's leaders when it was expedient, and keeping its distance when it was not. Thus on the pandering side, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's December 2002 invitation to the White House even before becoming Prime Minister (to enlist his support on Iraq) and fulsome praise for the AKP leadership after Turkey's 2007 Constitutional crisis ended with Abdullah Gül in the Presidency. And on the distancing side are Washington's initial "we don't take sides" reaction to the onset of that crisis and its similar attempt at even-handedness during the 2008 attempt to close the party.

This is not the place to argue the merits of the Bush administration's efforts to stay out of Turkish politics. The important point analytically is that its schizophrenia about the AKP over time succeeded in disappointing, frustrating and ultimately antagonizing virtually every element of Turkey's political spectrum: Kemalists became convinced that Washington sought to use the AKP as a stalking horse for setting up an Islamic republic in Turkey; AKP supporters suspected the Bush administration of colluding with Turkey's military to remove the party from power in exchange for a free hand on Iran. At best, Washington came across as naïve; at worst, cynical. The result was one more hit for the American "brand."

Taken as a whole, the factors described above have changed the way U.S.–Turkish relations work. It may be true that the notion of a "golden age" of strategic partnership in the late nineties is overblown. But there can be no doubt that U.S.–Turkish relations during the last years of the Clinton administration were characterized by a degree of mutual trust, collegiality and concrete achievement

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that find little reflection in the record of the past six years.

### **Interests and Values: Still Common?**

That raises the question of whether U.S.–Turkish relations can still validly be described as based on “common values and interests.”

With respect to the “interests” part of that formula, the answer is, “yes” – at least on the strategic level. The “Common Vision Statement” signed by Condoleezza Rice and then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül in 2006 made clear that, even after years of bilateral tension, there remained a virtual one-for-one correspondence in terms of what Ankara and Washington want in the regions surrounding Turkey. Both countries seek: a unitary, prosperous stable Iraq; a non-nuclear Iran playing a constructive role in the region; peace between Israel and all its neighbors; development of an energy transportation infrastructure out of the Caspian and Central Asia that is not under Russian control; an equitable solution to the Cyprus problem; progress in Turkey’s aspirations to join the EU; and a Russia that contributes to regional peace, stability and prosperity rather than threatening them.

Moreover, and without falling into the semantic swamp of whether or not Turkey can or should serve as a “model” for the Muslim world, a successful Turkey is an important and positive fact for U.S. interests in the region. As for Turkey, it is hard to imagine circumstances in which it would be to Ankara’s long-term advantage to be at strategic odds with the United States.

When one descends from the strategic to the operational level, however, the caustic effect of six years of bilateral dysfunction has unquestionably had an impact. Put bluntly, the Bush administration’s performance since 2002 has led many Turks in and out of government seriously to question – for the first time since World War II – whether Washington has the clarity of purpose and competence necessary to achieve the strategic objectives the two countries share.

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As Ankara’s confidence in America’s ability to lead has waned, Turkish diplomacy has shown a growing tendency to distance itself from that of Washington. Pursuit of “strategic depth” and “zero problems with neighbors” would likely have been hallmarks of the AKP government’s foreign policy under any circum-

stances. Serial collisions with U.S. policies at the operational level (e.g., over the PKK; over Turkey's engagement with Syria, Hamas and Iran) both reinforced Ankara's inclination to act unilaterally (usually with strong assurances of common ends) and fueled popular support for a go-it-alone approach.

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The consequences were apparent by mid-2008. Over the course of a busy summer, Turkey welcomed Iran's President to Istanbul; convened a new round of Syrian-Israeli indirect talks; adopted a highly nuanced position in response to Russian intervention in Georgia (which included a proposal for a Caucasus forum excluding the U.S. and apparent tension over U.S. warship transit into the Black Sea); and launched a *détente* process with Armenia. In none of these cases did there appear to have been much prior consultation with the Bush administration; in each – with the exception of the Armenian story – Washington's enthusiasm seemed well under control.

Thus, an ironic and probably abiding legacy of the Bush administration's stewardship of U.S.–Turkish relations has been to encourage the emergence of a more self-confident, activist Turkish diplomacy. This is not something, *per se*, that threatens U.S. interests in the region. Indeed, there remain issues, notably energy security, where Ankara would welcome stronger U.S. leadership. It does, however place a premium on meaningful consultation and coordination to avoid the surprises and misunderstandings that have too often been the norm since 2002.

What about common values? At first glance, the news here is worse.

On the Turkish side, polling data which put American approval ratings in the single digits last year (and in only the low teens more recently) point to a watershed in perceptions of what Turkish leaders still describe as their country's most important ally. The Iraq war, with its powerful images of Abu Ghraib and of Turkish troops hooded by American captors; the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war, with its presumption that what is good for America is good for all; years of U.S. inaction against the PKK, despite Washington's "with us or against us" rhetoric; vacillation in its treatment of the AKP: it is hard to imagine a set of factors better calculated to shake the confidence of Turks, regardless of their politics, that America and Turkey are in fact operating from a common set of values.

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On the American side (where, admittedly, fewer have been paying attention) there has also been erosion in perceptions of shared values. An important factor here has been the determination by some analysts to portray Turkey's more assertive foreign policy as directed against U.S. interests: the more flagrant have gone so far as to label the AKP "Islamofascist" – lumping it in the public eye with the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

A different, and more serious, critique has focused on Turkey's failure to address limitations on freedom of expression (Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk's indictment drew particular attention); on continuing discrimination against Christians and other minorities; and on constitutionally dubious efforts in 2007 and 2008 to hobble the AKP. Such episodes fueled questions as to whether Turkey shares the bedrock values of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Western democracy.

The Turkish Constitutional Court's decision not to close the ruling party has correctly been described as "dodging the bullet" in regard to this latter debate. Had the party been closed, it would have been difficult in the West to argue against the notion of Turkey as a "failed democracy." This does not mean that relations between Washington and Ankara would have imploded. But it would have become hard plausibly to argue that they were based on shared values. As in the case of Pakistan, the focus of any rationale for strategic cooperation would have had to shift from values to interests, where, as has been noted, substantial overlap remains at the strategic level. Whether that would be a satisfactory or sustainable foundation for either side over the long run is open to question.

At the end of the day, however, there is reason to hope that any "values gap" that may have opened in Turkish and American perceptions of one another could narrow or close in the period ahead.

For Americans, the Constitutional Court's decision not to close the AKP has for now validated Turkey's status as a functioning – if messy – democracy. Since the next administration seems likely, moreover, to take a less neuralgic view of engaging problematic international actors, it will probably be less inclined than its predecessor to read the worst into a more self-confident and independent Turkish diplomacy.

For Turkey, the intensity of negative images of the U.S. in recent years is of-



ten counterpoised by nostalgia for an America more in tune with its “better angels.” This helps explain the strong attraction to many Turks of Barak Obama’s message of hope despite John McCain’s much greater experience with Turkey and, from Ankara’s standpoint, his “right” position on the emotional

Armenian genocide issue. The next U.S. President will get a bounce in terms of Turkish public opinion just by not being George W. Bush. To the extent he and his foreign policy team reflect a more traditional style of American leadership, Turkish audiences may be willing to consider the period 2000-2008 an anomaly as far as American values are concerned.

## Rebooting

If it is correct that U.S. and Turkish strategic interests remain largely convergent, and that each side may be prepared to give the other the benefit of the doubt in terms of values, the challenge for the next administration will be one of execution rather than reinvention.

What can the administration that takes office January 20, 2009 do to reboot U.S.–Turkish relations? It needs to:

- Have a coherent, self-standing Turkey policy that integrates the various U.S. interests converging on its pivotal geography, and avoids the crisis-driven, ad hoc approach that over time will hamper reliable cooperation.

- Be clear about the kind of country Washington has in mind when it talks about common values. Turkey’s politics will remain messy. The U.S. clearly has no interest in being drawn into them. But the irreducible U.S. interest in Turkey is that it not fail, including as a democracy. Absent evidence of hostile intent toward U.S. interests, the next administration should make clear that it will work with those in Turkey who play by the rules of Western democracy and in whom the Turkish people put their trust. One Pakistan is quite enough.

- Get over the notion that Turkey’s more self-confident diplomacy is a threat to U.S. interests. Seeing it in those terms can make it so. Properly perceived and engaged, it can be added value.

- Make clear who in the U.S. national security bureaucracy runs Turkey pol-

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icy. A mismatch of responsibility and authority between those parts of the U.S. bureaucracy dealing, respectively, with Europe and the Middle East, has long handicapped management of U.S. relations with Turkey. The PKK fiasco is only the most blatant example; it must not be repeated.

- Put Turkey in the top tier. The next President and his foreign policy team should, as Secretary Rice did in early 2005 to such subsequent good effect, make it a priority to develop close personal relations with their Turkish counterparts. Given Turkey's event-rich neighborhood, it will not take long for their investment to pay dividends.

George W. Bush's successor faces perhaps the most daunting international environment of any American President since Harry Truman. As he seeks to rebuild American credibility and leadership, some countries will be able to help – or hurt – more than others. Turkey is such a country. The next U.S. administration has an enormous interest in doing everything possible from Day One to ensure Turkey ends up on the right list. Adopting the approach described above would be a good start.