



Memorandum to President-elect Obama

re: Turkey

Mark R. Parris

As your Administration undertakes the Herculean task of restoring America's footing and leadership abroad, some countries will be able to help-or hurt-more than others. Turkey has the potential to place high on either list.

Under your predecessor, US-Turkish relations have been chronically dysfunctional, punctuated by periodic near and real disasters. We have to do better. That will require prompt steps to correct conceptual and structural handicaps that have harmed our approach to Turkey for decades, but which have become acute in recent years.

First, we need to break the habit of thinking of Turkey "as a function of" the crisis of the moment

Turkey's geography is pivotal. It is a place we will need to get over or through to get forces or aid to the next Georgia, or Iraq or Lebanon. It is a place we will need to cope with regional bad actors. It is the best route for getting oil and natural gas out of the Caspian and Central Asia. It is essential to any strategy for coping with a resurgent Russia.

Typically, when we need something from Ankara, we need it "right now." The rest of the time this stable, historically reliable partner doesn't make the cut of the two or three issues Washington can handle at one time. Turkey therefore gets dealt with "as a function of" more pressing issues, each with its own logic, champions and timeline. The urgent consistently trumps the important.

That pattern grates in Ankara. In recent years it has eroded prospects for getting the timely, reliable cooperation we will always need from Turkey in the tough, unpredictable and vital neighborhood it anchors.

Your Administration needs a Turkey policy that integrates the various US interests that converge there, but stands on its own.

Second, we need to be clear about our own vision of Turkey
The last Administration's approach to Turkey was frankly schizophrenic, particularly in regard to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Loose rhetoric (vis. Colin Powell's reference to an "Islamic Republic"), the prominence assigned Turkey in the still-born Greater Middle East initiative, and an appearance of close personal relations at the top convinced many in Turkey we supported AKP as an "Islam light" alternative to more radical Islamic movements. Yet the Bush Administration's ambiguity toward attempts by AKP's hard core secularist adversaries to check the ruling party's success at the polls was widely interpreted as indifference. Our mixed signals left both sides of the debate in Turkey frustrated, angry and unsure about US policy at what could have been a defining moment for the Turkish Republic.

We clearly have no interest in injecting ourselves into the process of reconciling Turkey's Muslim and secular identities. But that does not mean we have no interest in its course or outcome. The irreducible US interest in Turkey is that Turkey succeed. However one may define success, it is incompatible with the notion of Turkey as a failed democracy.

Previous administrations have correctly assumed that a Turkey on the road to EU membership cannot fail. We do not have that luxury.

With the EU unable in the near future to provide a framework for Turkey's success, US policy will need to fill the breach. That does not mean we should identify ourselves with any Turkish political party or actor. But we must leave no room for doubt that, absent clear evidence of hostility toward our interests, it will be the policy of your Administration to work with and support those in Turkey who play by the rules and in whom the Turkish electorate places its trust. The corollary

is that we should take every opportunity to discourage elements who may be tempted to supplant or hamstring elected leaders, even if such attempts are dressed in trappings of “the rule of law.”



Third, we need to come to terms with a more activist, self-confident Turkish diplomacy

Turkish foreign policy under the AKP has diverged in significant respects from that of its predecessors. It has assigned greater importance to Turkey’s historic and religious connections to the former Ottoman and broader Muslim world. It has aimed to eliminate or reduce tensions with neighboring states (including, notably Armenia). It has actively sought opportunities to mediate or bring together regional players (Syria-Israel, Russia-Georgia). It has emphatically favored engagement over isolation (Iran, Hamas, Syria). It has launched ambitious independent initiatives (a Caucasus “Platform”).

These shifts reflect a considered, coherent world view among AKP foreign policy makers. They have by and large been undertaken without extensive consultation or coordination with Washington. They have repeatedly produced the appearance of gaps, and in some cases have reflected real gaps, between US and Turkey positions. Those gaps have been cited by some as reflecting an “Islamofascist” agenda aimed at detaching Turkey from its traditional close relationships with the U.S., the West and Israel.

We can prove those pundits correct by reflexively reading the worst into Ankara’s greater diplomatic activism and self-confidence. There is no reason to do so.

Ankara’s foreign policy objectives, as described by AKP foreign policy spokesmen and as reflected in Turkish diplomacy over the past half decade, remain broadly convergent with our own. The Turks know our actions can have enormous impact on their interests and therefore want neither to get on the wrong side of Washington nor to be surprised by us. There are areas (e.g., strategic energy transport) where they consider stronger

American leadership long overdue.

In developing your Turkey policy, we need to be realistic in our expectations. We should not expect Turkey always to be there just because it has tended to be in the past. We should

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expect some gaps in nuance and tactics. We should not look upon Ankara as cat’s paw, gendarme, or model. But the essential convergence of US and Turkish interests in the region provides ample scope for fruitful, genuinely strategic cooperation in what will inevitably be more than in the past a partnership of equals. Our interest lies in embracing and strengthening that partnership.

Fourth, we need to fix the EUR-NEA disconnect

To do that, we need to correct a defect in our own organization charts. For reasons of self-definition and Cold War logic, Turkey is considered in our national security bureaucracy a European country. It is therefore assigned to the various subdivisions responsible for Europe: the European Bureau (EUR) at the State Department; the European Command (EUCOM) at the Pentagon, etc.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, and especially since 9/11, the most difficult issues in US-Turkish relations have arisen outside of “Europe.” The majority have stemmed from developments in areas which are the responsibility of offices dealing with the Middle East: the Bureau of Near East Affairs (NEA) at State; Central Command (CENTCOM) at the Pentagon.

We pay a price for this mismatch between responsibility and expertise/interest. Key jobs in or relating to Turkey are routinely filled by European specialists often unfamiliar with fast-moving “out of area” crises along Turkey’s borders. Decision-makers in “NEA-land” generally lack exposure to Turkey, do not instinctively think of it when developing policy, and often resist its efforts to get into the game. When the EUR and NEA parts of the bureaucracy do not agree on matters relating to Turkey,

the result is often deadlock, which to the Turks is indistinguishable from simple non-responsiveness. The 2007 crisis over Turkey's threat to invade northern Iraq in pursuit of Kurdish terrorists resulted from just such a deadlock.

Your Administration needs to organize itself from Day One to keep it from happening again. The simplest fix will be to name to the key jobs in both the NEA and EUR pieces of our national security apparatus officials with experience in both regions. A more decisive solution may be to vest authority for coordinating Turkey policy in either a new senior position or in the office of the Vice President.

Fifth, we need a concrete agenda and interagency machinery for Turkey

The necessary complement to closing the EUR-NEA divide is to elaborate a concrete agenda reflecting your Administration's Turkey policy.

At least initially, this should not be something we negotiate with the Turks. It should be a hard-edged, comprehensive statement of what the U.S. wants in its relations with Turkey. It should describe in general terms how we will pursue those objectives. It should assign responsibility for doing so.



The process of developing an agenda will directly address the "function of" problem described above by getting on the table at the outset the range of US interests relating to Turkey and by highlighting potential conflicts and tradeoffs. It will empower those directly responsible for the relationship, notably our Ambassador, in managing competing demands from different US actors. Reflected in our public statements, it will focus public discussion on the breadth and importance of our interests in and around Turkey, insulating the relationship from sallies by hostile single interest groups.

To ensure such an agenda does not become a dead letter, it should be the product of and be supported by robust interagency machinery. The agenda document itself should

be staffed out and approved at the Cabinet level. A standing interagency group chaired by whomever you choose to oversee your Turkey policy should thereafter meet regularly to chart progress, identify problems/opportunities, and move promptly upward for decision matters that cannot be handled at the working level.

Sixth, you and members of the Cabinet should make it a priority to develop strong personal ties to your Turkish counterparts

Turks are not unique in their tendency to do things for people rather than institutions. Turks may be unique in the frequency with which Washington asks them to do hard things. We have a strong interest in making it easy for them to say, "yes." And, as decisions affecting relations with Washington tend to be made at the very top levels in Turkey, this is something that cannot be successfully delegated.

There is simply no substitute for early, sustained face time between you, the Vice President, your Secretary of State and other relevant Cabinet officers and your Turkish counterparts in laying the groundwork for a successful relationship with Turkey during your Administration.

We should not expect Turkey always to be there just because it has tended to be in the past.

First moves matter. Including Ankara on the itinerary of initial trips to the region; ensuring the Turks don't have to fight for a meeting at next fall's UNGA or in scheduling post-inaugural visits to Washington; making sure Turkey is in the first tier of countries given a heads-up on anticipated U.S. moves in their neighborhood will all pay dividends when, inevitably, we need Turkey's help. They will also buy some room for maneuver when backers of an Armenian genocide resolution come calling in advance of the April anniversary.

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