

Turkish – U.S. Relations in a Changing World

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I would like to thank the CSIS Turkey Project and my old friend Bulent Aliriza for organizing this timely event. The CSIS Turkey Project has set a vanguard example in Washington through its focus on Turkey for almost two decades. I would like to pay tribute to its efficient and admirable work relating to developments in my country in the past as well as the present.

Dr. Aliriza has not only been analyzing and explaining Turkish foreign policy, politics and economy to people in Washington but he has also been a constant source of reliable information for Turkish public opinion on developments in Washington, D.C. In this two-way information traffic, the CSIS Turkey Project has become a source of reference for many in both countries.

Dear friends,

The region Turkey is located in has been interesting for a long time. Consistent with this paradigm, we are currently passing through interesting and difficult times in our region:

- In the east, the Iranian nuclear issue remains unresolved,
- In the south, Iraq has yet to be secured from sources of instability,
- Efforts to resolve the Arab - Israeli conflict remain stalled and Turkish – Israeli relations are passing through difficult times,
- In the north, the Caucasus continues to be a potential source of renewed conflicts,
- In the west, reconciliation efforts in Bosnia face serious challenges,
- And in Cyprus, the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots continues despite various attempts to achieve a settlement.

Turkey plays an important, if not central, role in each of these issues, which all remain high on the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

Against the background of these challenges, the Turkish – American partnership is as important as ever.

During his first bilateral overseas trip to Turkey in April 2009, President Obama chose to use the term “model partnership” to describe Turkish-American relations.

To better understand the term, we should look at the unique characteristics of Turkey and the U.S.:

- Turkey is a secular and predominantly Muslim nation that has multiple regional identities, with an increasingly vocal standing in global affairs,

- The United States is a Western nation with a Christian majority that holds direct responsibility for global stability as the sole super power.

United States is a global actor, drawing her strength not only from her military might, but even more from her economic and scientific supremacy and core values like democracy, human rights, the rule of law and an inclusive pluralistic society based on entrepreneurship.

To sustain this standing, the United States needs to put more emphasis on her soft power and alliances with regional powers.

Turkey, on the other hand, has a unique standing drawing strength from her location and history.

Spanning Asia and Europe, she neighbors Africa through the Eastern Mediterranean. Her rich history makes Turkey an actor which shares a common heritage and cultural links with many different regions, countries and peoples.

The merging of the unique characteristics of both actors makes this relationship invaluable:

- Turkey and the United States work together to ease the cultural tensions between the East and the West and to ease the economic tensions between the North and the South.

- Turkey and the United States need each other for maintaining regional and global order and peace. In short order, Turkey's success story is a powerful antidote to the preachers of the clash of civilizations.

Thus, the term "model partnership" emphasizes the importance of close cooperation between Turkey and the United States based on common values and principles.

We have set out an ambitious agenda to further enhance our economic, commercial, and scientific relations.

Our total bilateral trade figure of 10 billion dollars last year remains far from reflecting the true potential we could attain.

Let me cite a stark example: the Turkish-Russian trade volume was 38 billion dollars in 2008. In other words, the Cold War did not prevent us from becoming major trading partners, in sharp contrast to the status of trade with our major and long-time ally. This is simply unacceptable.

To address this gap, last December, Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Obama announced at the White House a new “Strategic Framework” to enhance our economic and commercial ties.

Two Ministers have been assigned on each side to coordinate this new initiative. Minister of State Zafer Caglayan, one of the Turkish coordinator ministers, was in Washington in May and currently he is back in the U.S. on an extensive tour in various states to tap into the existing potential.

Within the new mechanism, we also agreed to establish a Business Council. The Terms of Reference of the Council are set and we are in the process of selecting its members.

After the Turkish “no vote” on sanctions against Iran in the U.N. Security Council, and op-eds arguing that there was a “shift of axis” in Turkish foreign policy, the idea of a model partnership may sound *naïve* to some.

On the contrary, these differences of opinion are only transient and they do not cast a shadow over the fundamentals of our alliance.

Turkish – American relationship has withstood the test of time. We have diversified and enriched its strategic texture.

Methodological differences on certain issues do not trump our shared principles.

Time and again, our dedication to uphold democracy, strengthen human rights, and ensure unhindered access to free markets have solidified the strategic nature of this relationship.

We were thus able to leave the difficulties behind us, be it regarding Cyprus in the 1970s, or Iraq in the early 2000’s and to continue our strategic cooperation with fresh perspectives.

The discussion on the so called “shift of axis” in Turkish foreign policy is simply wrong. The arguments and questions which have been raised miss some fundamental facts.

Turkey’s Western vocation is an irreversible process. Those who know Turkish history would know well that our Western vocation started well before the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923.

We view our goal of EU accession as the main pillar of our commitment to democracy, freedom and the free market economy. Our membership in NATO, on the other hand, constitutes the backbone of our national security.

Turkey has made considerable progress in her quest to achieve membership in the EU. Our relationship with the EU stands at a historically high point. We would have completed most of the negotiating chapters had we not faced the current political obstacles created by certain EU members for political purposes.

I should make one thing very clear: Turkey's policy, which is widely known as "the zero problem policy towards neighbors" is inclusive and not based on religion or ideology. Thanks to this policy, we have accomplished positive changes in our relations with all of our 12 direct and indirect neighbors. Only four of these countries are Muslim majority ones.

To give a few examples:

- Turkey's trade volume with her neighbors increased by six fold over the last seven years.
- We established high level strategic council meetings with Greece, Syria, Iraq, and Russia.
- Considerable progress was achieved in relations with Armenia.
- Our relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia are equally strong.
- We lifted visa requirements with Russia, Syria, Albania, Lebanon, Jordan, Libya and recently with Serbia.

At the same time, Turkey has increased her profile and involvement in promoting peace and stability in her neighboring regions and beyond.

This is because we are not immune from the consequences of conflicts in our region:

The war in Iraq, the conflict in Palestine, disputes in Lebanon, hostilities between Russia and Georgia, the conflict in Bosnia, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the Iranian nuclear issue have all had a direct or indirect impact on Turkey.

Therefore, we cannot observe events as an idle bystander. The high stakes warrant an active Turkish foreign policy to prevent the escalation of conflicts.

It is with this understanding that Turkey makes serious efforts to reconcile disputing parties in our region and beyond, which include

- Afghans and Pakistanis
- Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites as well as Arabs and Kurds
- Bosnian Muslims and Serbs
- Opposing groups in Lebanon
- Iranians and the international community
- And until recently: Israelis and Arabs

These efforts are necessary for Turkey's own security and for the stability of our neighboring regions. Turkey's efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue or to the differences in Bosnia should be viewed from this perspective.

Moreover, Turkey's relations with other global actors are complementary. Hence, our relations with the United States and the EU complement our presence in Eurasia and the Middle East.

These components are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, developing our relations with Syria or Russia does not indicate a shift of axis.

Similarly, Turkey's memberships in the UN Security Council, G-20, the Organization of Islamic Conference, the Council of Europe, the South East European Cooperation Process, or the OECD are also complementary.

Not only is the Secretary – General of the OIC a Turkish national, but so is the Chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. This is a clear example of the strength of Turkish diplomacy and the ability of Turkey to establish meaningful relations with different cultures and geographies.

Viewing this multi-faceted foreign policy as a shift of axis is not only inaccurate but also does an injustice to our sincere efforts to achieve peace and stability, to engage in more trade, to increase interdependency, and to solve conflicts through peaceful means.

When another European nation, such as France, Spain, or Sweden, tries to reach out to, say, Syria, nobody questions its foreign policy direction. Why then is Turkey's involvement in the Middle Eastern issues and her efforts to improve relations with her Middle Eastern neighbors used as a basis for arguments over a “shift of axis?”

Turkey's ability to reach out to various actors from Afghanistan to Iraq, from Palestine to Bosnia should be seen as an asset by our allies and not as a liability:

- Turkey has the ability to call on the Islamic world to put our own house in order. To give but one example, Turkey led the efforts for the creation of a human rights body within the OIC. Is this an asset or a liability?
- Turkey has been playing a vital role in achieving stability and preserving the unity of Iraq. Is this against the shared interests of our allies?
- Were our efforts to relaunch the Israeli-Syrian peace track after 8 years of stalling and the 5 rounds of indirect negotiations in conflict with the interests of our allies?
- What about our efforts for stability in Lebanon or in Bosnia?
- If there was a shift of axis, how could one explain the presence of our troops in Afghanistan?

I can certainly multiply these questions.

Allow me to offer some thoughts on the recent crisis over the humanitarian aid convoy to the Gaza Strip and the Iranian nuclear issue.

Let me start with the Gaza convoy incident and our relations with Israel:

Turkey was the first predominantly Muslim country to recognize Israel. It was the second country after the United States which recognized Israel. Our cooperation has continued uninterrupted for over six decades.

And this good relation between Turkey and Israel was only the recent episode in a long history of friendship between the Turks and the Jews. We are talking about a record of five centuries-long friendship here: a friendship that we inherited from our forefathers.

This friendship is now jeopardized by the Israeli attack on the Gaza Aid Convoy which left nine civilians dead –eight Turkish citizens and one American citizen of Turkish descent.

This is the first time in the history of the Republic of Turkey that her citizens have been killed by a sovereign state during peace time.

And this attack did not come from a nation traditionally hostile to Turkey; it came from a friend.

The issue at hand is simple, as much as it is tragic: nine people, all civilians have been killed. They were in international waters at the time.

I do not want to focus on the details and engage in rhetoric. I will only share factual information on the incident itself:

- The Gaza convoy was NOT an initiative of the Turkish Government.
- It was a civilian and non-governmental effort.
- It was NOT a Turkish convoy either. It was an international civilian effort. There were some 600 activists aboard the ships from 32 countries. Among the convoy's 600 activists were Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairead Corrigan-Maguire, European lawmakers from 18 countries, religious and spiritual leaders of all major faiths, journalists, business leaders, and an 86-year-old Holocaust survivor.
- Israeli defense forces attacked the ships in international waters, 72 miles off the nearest coast, in clear violation of international law.

After the incident, we continuously held to the view that Israel must accept her wrong-doing and apologize to the Turkish people for these killings. We also underlined the need for Israel to accept an international, independent inquiry as decided by the UN Security Council Presidential Statement.

Israel's current policy is leading the country towards global isolation. Israel is on the verge of losing one of her closest friends.

At this moment, there is not much to do on the Turkish side. The ball is in the court of Israel. This is about how Israel sees herself 10 years from now: with or without Turkey's friendship.

The same goes for Israel's relations with her neighbors.

We also insist that Israel changes its current policy towards the Palestine problem. This issue lies at the core of many problems across the globe. And as President Obama has rightfully highlighted, the continuation of the Palestine conflict provides ammunition to radicals from Pakistan to Afghanistan, from Iraq to elsewhere in the Middle East.

We should proceed towards a comprehensive peace in the Middle East based on a two-state solution, living side-by-side in peace and stability; in cooperation rather than conflict; all in welfare rather than poverty.

The Iranian nuclear issue is another hot topic that has a bearing on Turkish-U.S. relations.

Let me be clear: We are against a nuclear Iran. We do not want nuclear weapons around our borders.

However, we do not believe in the effectiveness of sanctions. In the past we have suffered from sanctions imposed on other countries in the region. They did not produce the desired impact on the targeted regimes.

It will be Turkey that will be hit hardest by sanctions or the use of force. If we are asked to bear the burden, we should also be given a chance to engage in an effective dialogue with Iran.

We are perhaps the only country within the Western community that can effectively transmit messages of the P5+1 to Tehran.

We have been working for a diplomatic solution, in coordination with our U.S. counterparts. We were not acting against U.S. interests. On the contrary, we were trying to convince Iran to agree to the demands of the international community. Thus, we have worked towards the same objectives.

With the Tehran Declaration of May 17, we have fulfilled almost all of the preconditions that were relayed to us regarding Iran. I am sure you have all read the letter that was sent by President Obama to the Brazilian President. The Tehran Declaration covers almost all concerns mentioned in that letter. Therefore, we would have expected a more positive response from our friends and allies.

It is with this understanding that we voted against the sanctions at the UN Security Council. We chose to give diplomacy a chance, while keeping the Teheran Deal on the table.

Our policy is consistent and principled. Had we supported new sanctions, this window of opportunity would have been closed forever.

We do not argue that the deal that was struck by Turkey and Brazil solves all problems and addresses all concerns. However, we believe it offers an important opportunity for the peaceful resolution of the problem. And this opportunity should not be missed.

Turkey and the United States need each other. We did not inherit any prejudices from our past. We have good and sound memories.

Our bilateral relationship has endured many challenges in the past.

Our alliance is firm and solid. Our objectives in the Middle East, the Balkans, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, and in many other regions and on various issues are overlapping. Our soldiers continue to work together in Afghanistan and off the shores of Somalia.

Differences in methods and approaches should not be allowed to overshadow this valuable relationship. And our ability to reach out to many different centers of power is an asset.

We stand at an important juncture of world history. The future is going to be made today. For this, we need wisdom, vigor and a shared vision. And we need each other more than ever.

Thank you for your attention.