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U.S.–Turkey Relations: How to Proceed after Obama

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In Brief: As mistrust continues to grow, the U.S.–Turkey relationship will be reduced to cooperation on a tactical level based on a barter mentality. To avoid this, trust must be rebuilt by reciprocal actions as a basis for better cooperation and coordination between the parties.

Relations between Turkey and the United States received a jumpstart during the Obama administration's first term, but the two countries were nevertheless unable to reach their ambitious goals. In Washington circles there seems to be “Turkey fatigue” as many are dealing with the same problems without progress. In Turkey, there is growing discontent with the United States due to its ongoing close cooperation with the PKK-linked PYD, and its delayed embrace of the elected government that survived July's military coup attempt.

Existing negative perceptions in bilateral terms undermine the basis for possible cooperation in a cooperative manner. Considering the fact that a new resident will be coming to the White House shortly, there is a need to review and revise the course of policies for the relations to gain momentum once again.

Legacy of Obama on Bilateral Relations

Obama's first visit abroad as president was to Turkey, and a “model partnership” was formulated to carry the U.S.–Turkey alliance beyond a military and strategic one. Expanding relations to include economic and social spheres, the vision of the model partnership was one of increasing interdependence and interaction, which would deepen relations, stabilize bilateral affairs that fluctuated in the post-Cold War period, and reduce the influence of the issues and crises of third parties.

Failing to fill in the big bubble of model partnership with concrete targets and the support of institutional structures, the two countries fell short of realizing a “special relationship.” This has paved the way for divergences, even on basic security and strategic issues, particularly in the Middle East. For instance, the disagreement on how to deal with Iran, specifically Turkey's rejection of the U.S.-initiated United Nations Security Council resolution on new sanctions, caused a major rift. Top U.S. officials questioned Turkey's alliance commitments, and in the meantime, deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel — particularly after the Gaza flotilla incident — left a sour taste. Failure to develop better communication channels left Turkey and the United States unprepared for major developments, such as the Arab uprisings.

In the initial phase of the Arab popular movement, there was not much disagreement between the two countries. But after increased U.S. security concerns following the tragic Libya consulate attacks, the two parties could not develop a common approach or reconcile their differences, even sinking to accusations and confrontations. The two countries differed in their reactions to the military coup in Egypt. They also diverged in their approach regarding the level of military engagement and choice of partners on the ground in the Syrian crisis. Ultimately, this course resulted in the loss of a major opportunity to together positively influence the course of Arab uprisings.

Moderate Crises in Reality, Severe Crises in Perceptions

Turkey could not completely appreciate the disturbance that the United States felt after the Libya attacks, which caused a divergence in U.S. perception of Arab uprisings. Similarly, the United States could not appreciate Turkey's position regarding the Kurdish Democratic Union Party/ People's Protection Units (PYD/YPG) in Syria or the failed coup attempt. These pose risks of leading tensions in bilateral relations, and severe damages in Turkish perceptions on the United States.

The United States' ongoing support for the PYD/YPG's active participation in defeating the self-proclaimed Islamic State group is causing a major crisis in bilateral relations. The problem is not about a temporary alignment for a single military campaign. Rather, it is turning out to be a repeated course that has the potential to become the new normal. The U.S. coalition's affiliation with the PYD/YPG may be regarded as a continuation of a practice that emerged after the bill crisis in 2003, in which the Turkish parliament was not able to reach the required majority of votes to authorize U.S. troops to use Turkish territory and airbases. Instead, the United States worked closely with Iraqi Kurds, and later declined Turkey's offer to send troops to Iraq for a peacekeeping mission.

The current situation may indeed be labeled version 2.0 of the previous crisis. Once again, the Kurds — rather than KDP related ones, the ones with links to the PKK — are seen as an important asset in a campaign in the region. In the new normal, the United States expects Turkey to accommodate the PYD as it did in the case of Kurdistan Regional Government. Moreover, the repeated course of military cooperation breeds the idea of Kurdish actors being better partners than Turkey, gaining ground in such institutions as U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).

Along with this reality on the ground in Turkey the perception of the United States is far more negative. During Operation Providing Freedom and Operation North Watch in the 1990s, Turks did not view U.S. intentions regarding the future of Kurds favorably. This perception strengthened further during the second Gulf War when the United States seemed to support the idea of establishing an independent Kurdish state, which may have adversely influenced Kurds living in Turkey. Along with the recent U.S. cooperation with the PYD/YPG, an enlarged version surfaced again as establishment of Great Kurdistan. The majority of Turkish people perceive U.S.-PYD cooperation as a threat. Furthermore, there are some circles in Turkey, even within the establishment, that believe the United States is pushing for such a project in the region at the expense of Turkish interests and territory.

The other disturbing issue for Turkey is about the U.S. reaction to the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Washington's delayed declaration of support for the civilian authority, and the ministerial level Turkish accusations of the United States being behind the coup left both parties with a sour taste. More importantly, the Turkish government has accused Fethullah Gulen with planning the coup and has asked for his extradition from the United States. This process is expected to be long and tedious and might cause another set of bilateral crises along the way. According to MAK research, 70 percent of the Turkish public believes that the United States was behind the coup¹. Some ruling elites even see the United States as the "mastermind" orchestrating a conspiracy with different tools to prevent the rise of a "great Turkey."

The future of bilateral relations seems dim considering the growing mistrust. Ankara's strategic cooperation with the United States will likely be reduced to cooperation on tactical level based on a barter mentality.

Need for Healthy Channels and More Stakes for Common Interest

Donald Trump will face many pressing issues in the bilateral agenda, such as the rise of Russia as an aggressive military power, violent extremism, the ongoing civil war in Syria, and fragile balances in Iraq. The discovery of new energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, the unresolved Cyprus question, and regional power dynamics will require new approaches to resolve the cycle of instability in the greater Middle East. The current landscape presents a chaotic environment for Turkey's national security and serious challenges for the United States. Thus, there is a fertile ground for cooperation at a geopolitical level.

The complexity of issues and differing strategic interests create a difficult situation for achieving cooperation and coordination. A long-term perspective with multi-dimensional political and strategic dialogue is necessary in building trust moving forward. Leaders must take reciprocal steps on resolving these matters, and do so with concrete action.

Security has long been the backbone for bilateral relations, but it is important to build up common interests and mutual understanding among different communities in each country. High politics overrun low politics, but more critical issues like economic cooperation and more interaction in future generations are the very foundations on which high politics

¹ <http://www.makdanismanlik.org/25-30-temmuz-2016-toplumunun-15-temmuz-2016-demokrasiye-darbe-tesebbusune-bakis-acisi-arastirmasi/>

stand.

The economic potential between the two countries is often untapped; the trade volume between Turkey and the United States was \$14.8 billion dollars in 2008 and had only grown to \$17.5 billion by 2015. The development of economic relations is important in terms of creating a community of stakeholders that may naturally endorse better bilateral relations for their own interests. For this reason, state institutions should play the role of catalyst in the cooperation with chambers of commerce.

Few people in Washington circles remember the U.S.-Turkish cooperation during the Korean War in the 1950s. This was a milestone in the strategic alliance, where the parties fought against the Communists in the early years of the Cold War and paved the way to NATO membership for Turkey. Nevertheless, a new generation of security and political elite from both sides remember March 1st bill crisis, or the hood event² when American soldiers captured Turkish military personnel in Iraq on July 4, 2003 more vividly. To overcome these negative images and build positive ones, there is a need for investment in a higher level of interaction among the bureaucracy and foreign policy elite. There is also a need for transparency in bilateral talks. Keeping dialogue in a closed circle causes interruptions in the flow of information to different political circles and to the public. With so much is happening behind closed doors, elites are starting to speculate the success of each deal and conspiracy theories have started to dominate public debate.

Current relations trend toward cooperation in a transactional manner. The urgency of the many crises at the international level forces this kind of dialogue, but it also consumes mutual understanding and the very basis of shared common values. The bilateral relationship between the United States and Turkey will face serious and deepening divergences, if not utter crisis, if this trend continues. There is need for a broader perspective that opens a new page based on trust and reinvigorates better cooperation and coordination between the parties. Thus, Donald Trump should consider leaving Turkey fatigue behind and frame a new Turkey policy for Washington DC.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jul/08/turkey.michaelhoward>

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