



# Avoiding Further Deterioration in Turkish–U.S. Relations: Less Emotion, More Wisdom

*By Ilter Turan*

The First World War is often judged to be one that no country wanted to begin or enter, but none could avoid doing so because the course each had taken left it with no option but to declare war against others after a number of conditions that it did not think would ever obtain materialized. Looking at recent developments in relations between Turkey and the United States, I remembered such analyses not because they are about to go to war, but because steps taken by each government, guided by domestic concerns, without sufficient appreciation of the concerns of the other side, and with misjudgments of each other's motives, may lead to irreparable damage in their relationship.

## A False Comparison

Many observers note that there have always been problems in Turkish–U.S. relations. On specific occasions they have become highly strained, but in the end both sides have found ways of working out their differences and the partnership has been restored. Examples of previous conflicts include the “infamous” letter from President Lyndon Johnson regarding Turkey's bombing of Cyprus to protect the lives of the Cypriot Turks in 1964 and the arms embargo the U.S. Congress imposed on Turkey in 1974 after its intervention on Cyprus. However, these events occurred under a set of circumstances different than today.

What is different in the current conflict than those on previous occasions? First, on earlier occasions disagreement was usually limited to a single problem area. Current problems emanate from different areas but form an interactive cluster, within which

each problem compounds the other, producing an atmosphere in which mutual confidence and the feeling of belonging to the same security community have eroded.

Second, the international context has been greatly transformed. The bipolar world of the Cold War placed the United States at the helm of the Western alliance, giving it the prerogative to determine its security policies. In return for offering its nuclear capabilities to defend other members, the United States was assured of their acquiescence. The end of the Cold War and of the bipolar world reduced pressures within the alliance for conformity and provided an opportunity for individual members to pursue different policies. This change has led to a mismatch of expectations regarding mutual behavior. The United States has often expected its allies to be as accommodating to its wishes as they had been earlier, while the latter, including Turkey, have displayed less sensitivity to these than might be expected among allies. The mismatch of expectations has led to feelings of being let down and frustration on both sides.

Third, after the end of the Cold War, although strong elements of convergence continued to prevail, the security needs of the two countries have become more varied. Pursuing a global strategy and constrained by the reluctance of the American public to send troops abroad, the United States has sometimes worked with allies that Turkey considers hostile. At other times, Turkey has pursued closer relations with countries that have adversarial relations with the United



States. Two examples clarify this point: In Syria, to fight the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the United States cooperates with the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considers to be an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that conducts rural terrorist activity. On Iran, on the other hand, current U.S. policy is to isolate the country from the international community, whereas Turkey prefers accommodation and its integration into the global system.

The divergence of interests has become more pronounced over the years as a result of Turkey's intensifying integration into the world economic system. As its economy has developed, Turkey's prosperity has come to depend on external trade and foreign capital flows, leading it to initiate trade or to import capital from many countries, with Russia constituting a prime example. Understandably, economic relations facilitate and are facilitated by better political relations. Turkey's new economic partners are not always viewed with favor by its allies, but this seems to be a wider problem, as U.S. protestations that Germany should not help build a new pipeline bypassing Ukraine to buy Russian gas testifies.

Finally, there seems to be a wave of populism that is sweeping democracies and that has brought populist leaders to power in the United States and Turkey. Populist leaders exhibit a proclivity to conduct politics, be it internal or external, in highly personalistic terms, reducing the role of the institutional frameworks through which foreign policy is usually formulated and implemented. Furthermore, they also exhibit a tendency to render external relations an extension of domestic politics. It seems that highly personal conceptualization of politics and rendering external relations a part of domestic politics in both countries have taken their toll on the relationship, injecting additional difficulties into a link that was already experiencing challenges following the end of the Cold War.

In short, the basic assumptions under which Turkish-U.S. relations were conducted in the past have been changing. Undeniably, things have been getting worse. Some newspaper headlines in both

countries have suggested that the relations are about to break, that the United States is finding other allies in the region while planning to penalize Turkey for its uncooperative behavior, or that Turkey no longer considers the U.S. link as being of primary importance and has been looking around for other options. Less than careful remarks uttered by political leaders on both sides only serve to reinforce such speculation.

## Responding to Changing Global Conditions

The deterioration of the relationship comes at a time when changing circumstances would lead one to think that more rather than less cooperation may be needed in the future. Whereas immediately following the end of the Cold War there was a general feeling that the alliances developed during it would no longer be necessary and therefore be gradually disassembled, more recent developments suggest that the need for the continuation of the Western alliance has not fully disappeared and may be intensifying. Russia has chosen not to become a member of a global system of democracies and market economies; instead it has chosen to challenge it. This stance has become manifest in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ukraine, and the Caucasus, which are of major security interest to Turkey, as well as in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe. It is more than likely that Russia will try to intensify its influence and try to project it to new areas. Security arrangements, such as NATO, in which the United States and Turkey are indispensable partners continue to offer an effective instrument to counter the security challenge Russia poses to both.

Turkey with its market economy and democracy (although an illiberal democracy that is in need of improving its record on human rights, the rule of law, and freedom of expression) continues to share similar understandings with the United States regarding the proper form of government and the principles on which an economy should be organized and operate. Furthermore, Turkey has managed to achieve reasonably smooth social and economic change, constituting a center of stable and effective government in a region marked by neither. Egypt has an extremely fragile, unpopular government. Iraq has

a system still in the making. Even Saudi Arabia, on which the current U.S. administration has placed high hopes, is fragile and prone to unexpected changes. In short, the United States and Turkey continue to be natural partners in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Caucasus to help to achieve stability and build a world order in conformity with their visions.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

There are persuasive reasons for the United States and Turkey not to allow their relations to deteriorate beyond repair. Current developments, on the other hand, contain the danger that the relationship may be significantly damaged unless care is exercised. What should be done?

First, it may be useful for top leaders to refrain from their continuing confrontational public debate. While each leader feels that he is justified in complaining about the other in public, such a strategy only leads each side to escalate its own rhetoric, making it difficult to work toward an accommodation as the pressure of mobilized public opinion reduces their maneuvering space.

Second, and closely related to first point, is obeying more strictly the golden rule of foreign policy that it should not be rendered an extension of domestic policy. This rule applies to the executive and legislative branches of government. Although the case of the American evangelical preacher Andrew Brunson, currently under house arrest in Turkey, has already evolved into a domestic issue of national pride in both societies, it is still possible to reduce the space it occupies on the bilateral agenda if both sides feel it important to do so.

Third, rather than conducting policy by pronouncements and Twitter messages at the highest level, it is better to allow relevant agencies of government to work on developing policy alternatives and implementing policy. On several issue areas, for example, the militaries of the two countries have been able to continue to work together well in parts of Syria. The training of Turkish F-35 pilots in the

United States continues. Furthermore, both countries have highly competent diplomats capable of finding a modus vivendi on many issues.

Fourth, it may be useful to separate issue areas and not employ instruments of one in another. It seems particularly relevant not to use economic instruments in dealing with political problems. Putting into effect economic sanctions to penalize the Turkish government with regard to Preacher Brunson is a case in point. Economic links should help moderate the severity of political problems rather than be used to reinforce them.

Fifth, it may be important to encourage civil society organizations, such as foreign and security policy think tanks and business associations, to do more work in helping public opinion in both countries to become aware not only of the problems between them but also of common interests.

It is clear that relations between Turkey and the United States are going through a difficult period having roots in post-Cold War global change as well as in changes in the domestic politics of both societies. The nature of the convergence of their national interests has been transformed but solid grounds continue to exist for retaining a strong partnership. To achieve that, however, less emotion and more wisdom are needed.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

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