

US-TURKEY RELATIONS: ARAB SPRING AND THE SEARCH FOR MODEL PARTNERSHIP



US-Turkey relations in 2011 were in stark contrast to the “troubled” year of 2010. Policy debates in 2010 focused on the political and diplomatic fallout from the Mavi Marmara incident and Turkey’s “No” vote against the UN Security Council resolution on Iran. Policy-makers in Washington called into question Turkey’s foreign policy direction and the intentions of its leadership. Extrication of the Turkish-Israeli relationship from the US-Turkey relationship represented a structural change. As the two sides were seeking ways to adjust to the new reality, the historic transformations sweeping the Middle East in 2011 created a new dynamic in the bilateral relationship. Creation of a special personal rapport between President Obama and Prime Minister Erdoğan was critical for the leadership on both sides to recognize once again that their countries’ relationship needed strengthening. Not-

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withstanding the differences on a variety of issues, the move toward forging a “model partnership” has begun.

One of the most significant turning points in Turkish-American relations took place as a result of the “frank” conversation between Obama and Erdoğan during the Toronto G-20 Summit in June 2010. Although early reports of the meeting suggested that it was a rather frigid encounter, relations between the two countries and communication between the two leaders improved dramatically in its aftermath. While the grumbling in Washington continued and policymakers were reconsidering and possibly reformulating their approach toward Turkey, the onset of the Arab Spring changed the dynamics in a big way. The momentous events in the Middle East led to increased appreciation on both sides for the need to better coordinate their regional foreign policies and collaborate more closely, especially in international forums. In the meantime, for many in Washington, Turkey emerged as a “model” for the democratizing movements in the Middle East. Turkey’s consistent endorsement of the peoples’ movements was an assurance to US policymakers that Turkey shared their interest in achieving and maintaining a stable Middle East, especially in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Iraq.

The security dimension of relations also improved dramatically in this period as a result of Turkey’s agreement to host the NATO radar system. Turkey’s approval created a significant and positive impetus to bilateral relations despite the fact that Turkey announced sanctions against Israel at the same time. This move was a deliberate message to Washington that Turkey, after two decades of a “trilateral” relationship, wanted to deal with the US one-on-one instead of having to factor in its relations with Israel. Turkey’s decision also demonstrated that its relations with the Western world, and specifically with the United States, should not be viewed through the lens of its relations with Israel. Thus, Turkey, with this new course of foreign policy, intended to end the “linkage politics” in its relations with the United States.

Bumps in the Road

Obama made his first overseas presidential visit to Turkey. This choice was part of the new administration’s broader effort to start a new conversation with the Muslim world in an effort to repair deeply damaged relations over the course of the post-9/11 decade. US-Turkey relations had been damaged in part by the Turkish parliament’s refusal to allow US troops to invade Iraq through Turkey in 2003. During his visit, President Obama’s famous formulation of the US-Turkey relationship’s future as a “model partnership” and his outlining of possible avenues of cooperation¹ were attempts to redefine the nature of the bilateral relationship and extend the level of cooperation after a crisis period during the Bush administration (except for the limited rapprochement toward the end of Bush’s second term). From Turkey’s perspective, Obama’s visit and the new paradigm he offered signaled that the US appreciated Turkey’s critical position in the region and intended to broaden the scope of coordination and cooperation on regional issues, thereby forming a new partnership based on respect and consideration of mutual interests.

After Obama’s trip, Turkey and the United States engaged in dialogue to reframe the relationship and repair previous problems. In this period, Turkey’s growing clout in its region and in the international arena made it a significant actor in many areas that were also at the top of the US foreign policy agenda. For example, dealing with the spread of nuclear weapons was one of the campaign promises of the Obama administration; upon winning the election, despite some opposing voices in Washington, Obama signaled to the Iranian regime that he would work on reducing tensions and establish channels of dialogue. Turkey, due to its close relations with Iran, was (and has been) uniquely positioned to help resolve this conflict through diplomacy and negotiations. Together with Brazil, it succeeded in signing the Tehran Declaration in May 2010. However, for the Obama administration, this was an Iranian attempt to curtail US efforts to impose international sanctions. The reaction of the US administration was

¹ For a full text of Obama’s remarks at the Turkish Grand National Assembly, see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-turkish-parliament>.

a disappointment for the Turkish side as it viewed the Declaration only as a confidence-building measure that could pave the way for further negotiations rather than a comprehensive solution. In the UNSC, Turkey voted against the sanctions resolution on Iran as it sought to stand by the Tehran Declaration, resulting in US disappointment and Washington's questioning of Turkey as a "reliable" ally. Since the 2003 Turkish decision against the US invasion of Iraq, this was the most significant disagreement between the sides. Today, nuclear negotiations are arguably behind the progress that would have been possible with the Tehran Declaration, which remains a missed opportunity. Nevertheless, the Turkish "No" vote proved to both sides that there was a serious disconnect in understanding the approaches of one another.

While the two sides were sorting out and clarifying their positions with regard to the upcoming sanctions vote at the UNSC (Turkey was a non-permanent member at this point), the Mavi Marmara incident created yet another source of disagreement between the US and Turkey. Considering the nature of the attacks in international waters and that one of the victims also held US citizenship, Turkey expected US backing and public condemnation of the Israeli attack on the Mavi Marmara; however, the Obama administration did not meet this expectation and failed, from the Turkish perspective, as a strong ally of Turkey. Instead, the US focused on trying to repair the relationship between Turkey and Israel during a process of negotiations up until the summer of 2011. Secretary Clinton worked behind the scenes along with her counterparts to salvage at least a working relationship between Turkey and Israel and a possible solution to the conflict.

The Mavi Marmara incident and Turkey's "No" vote at the UNSC made it clear for both US and Turkish policymakers that there was a serious gap in their approaches to regional issues. An increasing number of voices in the American foreign policy establishment were dismayed at the Turkish foreign policy posture. Some analysts unfairly charged that Turkey could no longer be "trusted" as it decided to shift its main axis away from the West to the East. This often politically-motivated reading of Turkish policy tended to overlook the

Turkish mediation efforts in the Iran nuclear file since 2009. Serious analysts of Turkish foreign policy called for recognition of the potential benefits to be drawn from the Turkish foreign policy posture in the region, more specifically its ability to talk to the Iranian side in a manner unmatched by any member of the P5+1 countries. Turkey, on the other hand, defended its policies as sovereign decisions better suited than the American ones for the post-Cold War environment and the regional resolution of disputes. From Turkey's perspective, the US seemed to be headed for replicating its mistakes in Iraq by pressuring and cornering Iran.

At this critical juncture, Obama and Erdoğan met in Toronto, which according to many was one of the most important meetings between the leaders of the two countries. Although the leaders did not offer photo opportunities or a press conference, the information leaked from the meeting demonstrated that the two leaders were trying to find a common language and ways to better communicate on a wide range of issues including Iran's nuclear program, Middle East peace, Afghanistan, the PKK, and the flotilla incident. Obama and Erdoğan reportedly told each other that they were "protecting" Israel and Iran respectively.² Contrary to the expectations of many, the meeting became a turning point in bilateral relations as the two leaders recognized the importance of working together, and more importantly, of increasing the level of communication and bilateral exchanges on issues of common concern. Afterwards, the level and frequency of communication between the two countries' leaders and high-level diplomats increased, while regional developments furthered this as being imperative for both parties. Turkey in this period initiated a new strategy of strengthening bilateral dialogue with the US at many levels while both sides were able to prevent Turkey's dispute with Israel from damaging this relationship.

² New York Times, September 11, 2011. "New Challenges for Obama and Turkey's Premier"; Today's Zaman, June 27, 2010, "Erdoğan, Obama hold "candid" discussions at critical summit," <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-214351-Erdoğan-obama-hold-candid-discussions-at-critical-summit.html>.

Arab Spring: An Opportunity for the Emergence of Model Partnership?

The Arab Spring added a new dynamic to the relationship as it effectively declared the end of the “Camp David order” – the hallmark of which being US support for authoritarian regimes in the Middle East in return for cooperation with or tacit approval of Israeli policies. The secure flow of oil out of the Gulf and the fight against terrorism were also part and parcel of this regional order. Turkey in its dynamic relationship with the region in the 2000s pointed to this structural and unavoidable change. When the regional earthquake started in Tunisia, it was not entirely unexpected. After all, current Turkish President Abdullah Gül had already told the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 2003,

“Every single country must put their own houses in order. We must pay heed to the demands of our people. In this regard, both political and economic reforms ought to be implemented.”³

The Arab uprisings in early 2011 provided the US and Turkey with an opportunity and a necessity to discover new forms of cooperation and policy coordination due to the urgency for action on the ground. In Tunisia, Turkey and the US endorsed the revolution and embraced the transitional government. However, it would be simplistic to expect both countries to adopt the same policies. In Egypt, Prime Minister Erdoğan was the first foreign leader to call on Mubarak to step down. The US administration tried to walk a careful line in Egypt as some of its allies, such as Saudi Arabia, were not happy about the possible spread of the revolution to the rest of the Arab world. Despite its immediate hesitation as reflected in Secretary Clinton’s initial reaction to the Egyptian protests, the Obama administration used its leverage with the Egyptian military to implement an “orderly transition.” As both the US and Turkey endorsed the legitimate demands of the Egyptian people, it became clear for the US policymakers that Turkey, as a Muslim majority secular democracy, chose to be on the “right side of history.” Turkey had developed strong ties

with many Arab countries (and hence with the authoritarian regimes) in the past decade, but this did not prevent it from seeing the Arab revolutions for what they were – a regional earthquake with long-term structural implications for decades to come.

In the case of Libya, the coordination in relations was tested at the international level. Turkey’s initial reluctance to endorse NATO action and its willingness to keep channels open with Qaddafi until the last minute derived from a recognition that the wave of revolutions could be tainted by military intervention and the belief that Qaddafi could still be persuaded. Also, Turkey opposed a French-led “coalition of the willing” type of operation and preferred an operation conducted within the NATO framework and with the active involvement of the UN and possibly the Arab League. Turkey kept its embassy in Tripoli open and Western nations, including the US, used it to keep in touch with their citizens as it was the only foreign embassy left operating in Libya. Turkey also undertook the largest humanitarian effort in its history by evacuating more than 20,000 of its citizens out of Libya. In the wake of Qaddafi’s threat to go from “door to door” and show no mercy to the rebels in Benghazi, Turkey readjusted its initial position against a possible NATO action and took part in the humanitarian aspects of the operation while also helping to enforce the arms embargo against Libya by utilizing its military forces. As the US avoided yet another full-blown invasion of a Muslim country by “leading from behind,” Turkey showed flexibility in its opposition to outside intervention in the face of failed attempts to broker a soft landing.

Communication and coordination between Turkey and the United States continued to intensify throughout the Arab Spring. When the protests erupted in Syria, both countries had a strong sense of each other’s interests and objectives. Very early on in the Syrian conflict, Turkey spearheaded an intensive effort to convince the Assad regime to implement meaningful change. While it did so, Turkey also knew that the lesson from the Arab Spring was clear: legitimate demands of the people had to be accommodated and the regimes incapable of adopting a course of serious change were doomed to fail. As Turkey shifted to an anti-Assad stance in the summer of 2011 after seven months of intensive diplo-

³ Iran Exclusive, Official Website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, <http://www.tccb.gov.tr/pages/visits/iran-exclusive/tehran>.

macy, the US coordinated its reaction with Turkey and endorsed the Assad regime's fall. Today, the course of action to bring about Assad's fall remains unclear due to regional dynamics and the upcoming presidential election in the US. As Turkey is confronted with the biggest challenge of the Arab Spring, US policymakers continue to work with Turkey on Syria. Its endorsement of the peoples' movements during the Arab Spring has proven that Turkey is not only a strong partner to be reckoned with but also a democracy deeply invested in the emergence of stable and democratic governments responsive to the legitimate demands of the people in the MENA region.

Fulfilling the Model Partnership

The change from the talk of an "axis shift" in 2010 to the debates on the applicability of the "Turkish model" in 2011 has been dramatic. More importantly, this is not due to a successful reconciliation between Turkey and Israel, which could have prompted a change of heart in US policymakers. On the contrary, the relations between Turkey and Israel remain at one of their lowest points in history despite US efforts to mediate a resolution of the dispute through the UN's Palmer Commission. After the leak of the Palmer Commission's report by *The New York Times*, Turkey announced its pre-planned but postponed sanctions against and downgrading of relations with Israel. On the same day, Turkey also announced that it would host the NATO radar system, which had been in negotiations for quite some time (the sticking point for Turkey in this matter was the identification of the radar system as protection against Iran). The timing of these two announcements could not have been better. The message was that Turkey would treat its relations with Israel independently of its transatlantic alliance. Although Washington was still worried about the increased tension in the region between Turkey and Israel and Turkey's promise to "defend the freedom of navigation in the Eastern Mediterranean," barring further escalation of the situation on Turkey's part, the US was satisfied that the NATO radar would be installed in eastern Turkey.

After this point, Turkey managed its relations with Israel and the United States on separate tracks. Until now, and especially in the 1990s, good relations with the state of

Israel were sine qua non for good relations with the US. The bilateral partnership almost always involved a third dimension; Israel's security and interests in the region. Turkey thought the road to Washington required a detour through Jerusalem, a perception strengthened by the US preference that Turkey purchase the latest military equipment and technology from Israel. The US policy was to make sure that Israel maintained close relations with "moderates" like Turkey in the region. The regional earthquake we have been experiencing has shown that this model does not work. More crucially, Turkey's economic and political power does not allow such an arrangement to work as Turkey feels its relations with Israel are separate from its relations with the US. In various recent meetings, American and Turkish leaders have spent less and less time on Turkey's relations with Israel. In September 2011, Obama asked Erdoğan not to increase tensions with Israel, but the subject reportedly took only five minutes in a meeting of almost two hours. Washington no longer considers good relations with Israel a prerequisite to cooperate with Turkey in the region and around the globe. Israel has effectively been taken out of the US-Turkey conversation as a stakeholder and decoupled from the bilateral relationship.

Since the Toronto meeting in June 2010, the relationship has become a truly bilateral one, with the Israeli-Turkish relationship becoming much less of a determining factor. Israel's adoption of a skeptical and wait-and-see approach vis-à-vis the Arab uprisings combined with increased American frustration with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has contributed to this trend. During the Seoul meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Erdoğan, Turkish-Israeli relations did not make it to the agenda. In the press conference after the meeting, both leaders stressed the increased level of coordination between two countries. While President Obama said the parties are "very much in agreement" on Syria, Prime Minister Erdoğan praised the increased level of bilateral trade and US support in fight against PKK. The meeting took place shortly before the Prime Minister's visit to Tehran and his meetings with Iranian leaders including the Supreme Leader Khamenei. Despite its disagreements with Iran over Syria, Turkey remains uniquely positioned to contribute to the resolution of the nuclear issue, a fact that the US leadership un-

derstands.

US-Turkey relations today, however, are not restricted to these more urgent regional problems. Both sides coordinate and cooperate on a wide variety of issues at the regional and global level – and recently without having to worry about Turkey’s relations with Israel. As the US seeks strong partners in the region and around the globe in line with its recently announced shift towards Asia, Turkey’s vision of a stable and democratic region strikes policymakers as a welcome one. Turkey’s multi-faceted relations with the US have the potential to strengthen and grow, but challenges remain before a model partnership is realized. If the model partnership cannot be institutionalized and formalized through sustained political and security dialogue and strengthened economic and social exchanges, the relationship will be vulnerable to short-term political or leadership changes.

Challenging issues, such as the Middle East peace process and Iran’s nuclear program, can still damage the emerging model partnership especially if they involve unilateralist and militarist postures. Turkey considers the Arab-Israeli conflict as the most serious obstacle to the emergence of a regional security framework. If there is violent fallout from the peace process, Turkey and the US may find themselves in opposite positions. Also, a possible Israeli attack on Iran would potentially strain the US-Turkey relationship.

Despite higher-level rapprochement, Turkish public opinion remains suspicious of US intentions in the region. This may be remedied to a certain extent by the US withdrawal from Iraq (although increased instability may be blamed partly on the US) and continued US support for Turkey against PKK activities in northern Iraq as well as a less aggressive American posture in the region. While the US withdrawal was welcomed by Ankara, the US support for the Maliki government, especially in the context of his increasingly divisive policies, sends Turkey mixed messages. Moreover, it is troubling for Turkey to see that Iran is increasing its influence over Iraq at unprecedented levels, which further complicates the Syria situation. Egypt will be the key country for the region as a whole in the move toward democracy, transparency, and rule of law. Turkey expects the SCAF

to transfer power to a civilian government as soon as possible. Any sign of establishment of a military “tutelage system” ala the “wrong Turkish model” would damage the US image further in Turkey and in the region. The US has little willingness or ability to influence the Egyptian political scene in a significant manner at this point. Yet, it will need to make sure it does not appear to turn a blind eye to military tutelage out of fear for Islamist groups’ participation in politics. This would bring back the memories of Bush administration’s approach to the 2006 Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections.

In the coming years, the trajectory of model partnership will depend on the peaceful resolution of regional problems and transformation of the region toward democracy. Both the US and Turkey have strong interests in a stable and democratic region. If a military showdown with Iran can be avoided and progress is achieved on the Israeli-Palestinian track, the Middle East may avoid wasting yet another decade. Syria has the potential to seriously destabilize the region and has already created new political and sectarian fault lines. But regardless of what happens in Syria in the short term, the Middle East as a whole will have to focus on reconstruction, economic progress, capacity-building, and establishing transparent political institutions over the next decade. If the US proves that it can play a constructive role in the region, the model partnership will have a much better chance of fulfillment.

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