

# Reforging an Alliance: Turkey and the US in a New Era

*Solî Özel*

Professor of International Relations  
Kadir Has University

In his recently published memoirs, former Vice President Dick Cheney wrote:

*Turkey had stood with us in Korea and, as a NATO member, been an invaluable ally during the Cold War...But by 2002 a worrisome change was under way, and my visit with Turkish leaders, though cordial, was far different from the one I had made in 1990, when we were seeking allies to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait...*

*In November 2002 the Islamist AKP party would win a majority in the parliament, making Recep Erdogan, leader of the party, prime minister the following March. The newly elected parliament would reject our request to deploy the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division through Turkey...*

In general, I think we failed to understand the magnitude of the shift that was taking place in Turkey. The significance of an Islamist government taking power in one of America's most important NATO allies was in a sense obscured because of all the other challenges we faced.

Today, Turkey appears to be in the middle of a dangerous transition from a key NATO ally to an Islamist-governed nation developing close ties with countries like Iran and Syria at the expense of its relations with the United States and Israel.

This pretty much summarizes the view of many in the United States concerning Turkey's government and its foreign policy. The recent downgrading of diplomatic relations with Israel accompanied by acrimonious language on the

part of the authorities certainly reinforced such views. Turkey is seen as turning its back on the West and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is deemed as Islamizing Turkey's foreign policy. Such views are propagated incessantly, disregarding the actual record. Even the facts that Turkey just agreed to be the radar site of NATO's missile shield system that aims at Iran, and that it works closely with the Obama administration on Iraq, Syria and the broader Middle East are easily ignored.

Outwardly, relations between the US and Turkey appear to be on the rocks since the Iraq resolution that Cheney has alluded to. There are Turkish complaints because of insufficient American assistance against the terrorist organization Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that is headquartered in northern Iraq. There are disagreements over how to deal with Iran's nuclear program. Turkey's negative vote at the UN Security Council for sanctions against Iran generated rage both in the White House and on Capitol Hill but since then Ankara's relations with Tehran have changed considerably.

Finally, a major cause for Turkish-American tension is the troubled relations between Turkey and Israel these days. This generates problems, particularly with Congress, as every instance of deterioration in relations engenders a reaction in that body. This usually takes the form of a resolution to recognize the forced displacement and deaths of Ottoman Armenians in 1915 as genocide.

Contrary to appearances though, Turkish-American relations are enjoying a second spring as Turkey tries to position itself as America's main ally in a very troubled region that is undergoing a profound transformation. The relative autonomy of Turkish foreign policy in the region at a time when American influence, capacity and resources are limited generates some friction. However, the makers of Turkish foreign policy are fully aware that their regional aspirations are unlikely to be fulfilled without the assistance of Washington or in spite of it.

As Walter Russell Mead put in a recent article, "On the whole, in spite of the inevitable clashes and disagreements, a greater Turkish presence in the Middle East will likely be welcome in Washington...Turkey can help restore that balance, something that would ultimately let the US shrink its Middle Eastern footprint without compromising vital interests. Turkey, on the other hand, is likely to benefit from Washington's tacit support—especially if the relationship is not too public and it doesn't look as if Washington rather than Ankara is running the show...Turkish-US relations are likely to cause intermittent heartburn and table thumping in both countries. Nevertheless, it looks as if their shared interests lead the US and Turkey to update and renegotiate their sixty year old partnership in a changing region."

### **The story of the past**

The drastic changes that marked the end of the Cold War dramatically altered the strategic calculus of the Western security system. Global developments in the context of post-September 11, 2001, developments have further transformed the security perceptions of the key actors in the international arena. Thus, the radical change in the source and nature of threats gave way to Turkey's search for a new role, strategy, and set of policies particularly towards its neighborhood. In the second decade of the post-Cold War era, in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks and the American misadventure in Iraq, Turkey's regional strategic profile would rise consider-

ably, and its foreign policy would try to carve for itself a zone of autonomous action.

Turkey had been a staunch ally of the United States and a NATO member throughout the Cold-War era. Hence, from the beginning, Turkish-American relations were defined mainly, if not exclusively, along the security dimension. As a result, the strongest institutional link that existed between the two countries was the military one. In time, the Pentagon and the Turkish General Staff turned into the most reliable and trusted point of contact for each other. As such, they were able to maintain relatively stable links and a healthy respect for each other even in times of serious difficulties in bilateral relations between the two countries.

Relations became more complicated at the end of the Cold War. With the end of the bipolar era and the absence of the Soviet threat, Turkey's geostrategic importance at first came under increasing scrutiny. The interests of the two partners diverged, as was to be expected between a global and a regional power in the absence of a well-defined common threat. Operations 'Desert Shield' and 'Desert Storm,' and the subsequent 'Operation Provide Comfort' in Iraq made Turkey uncomfortable. Iraq's meaning for Americans and the Turks was altogether different, and the tensions that would fully come to surface on the eve of the 2003 Iraq War were there throughout the 1990s. Still, both the Iraq crisis/war and the subsequent dissolution of Yugoslavia, along with the collapse of the Soviet Union, recalibrated Turkey's strategic importance. The opening of the vast, energy-rich Caucasus and Central Asia and the creation of independent states out of the ex-Soviet world helped raise Turkey's profile. The first discussions of Turkey as a "model" surfaced during this 'genesis' period.

In the early 1990s, Turkey was concerned about the ultimate intentions of the US vis-à-vis the Kurds of Iraq. These were somewhat dissipated when the U.S. delivered the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, who was a guest at the Greek embassy in Nairobi, to a Turkish military team in Kenya in 1999. In some sense the deliv-

ery of Öcalan was the culmination of developments in American foreign policy, a brainchild of the late diplomat Richard Holbrooke that placed Turkey near the center of a new strategic conceptualization. In short this new perspective on Turkey, articulated in different times with fairly similar emphases by Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama, valued the country as much for what it was as for where it was.

In Holbrooke's terminology, Turkey was the frontline state of the post-Cold War era. Since there was no imminent threat of war, its defining characteristics elevated Turkey to such a central role. From Morocco to Afghanistan, a vast region was defined by authoritarianism, resistance to globalization (both economically and politically), corruption, youth bulges and increasingly by its proclivity to generate violent Islamist radicalism. Almost at the center of that area, close to the energy resources of the Caspian basin as well as the Gulf, Turkey stood as a capitalist, secular, pluralist (if not yet totally democratic) Muslim country that was a member of the Atlantic Alliance. The American efforts to open the path for Turkey's European Union (EU) accession ought to be seen in the context of Washington's desire to see Ankara fully integrated in the transatlantic system as a bona fide democratic country. In view of Turkey's domestic developments during the first decade of the post-Cold War era, this latter attribute meant the integration of the Islamist movement fully into the political system and a resolution of Turkey's Kurdish problem by an extension of citizenship rights. President Clinton, who said at the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 1999, that the 21st Century would be largely shaped by decisions that Turkey took, was the first President to articulate this thinking. This approach culminated in President Obama's declaration, during his visit to Ankara in April 2009, that the US and Turkey were in a "model partnership".

### **September 11 and the Iraq War**

The period between al-Qaeda's attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, and the still-unfolding Arab revolts of

2010-11, brought dramatic changes to the international system and the Middle Eastern regional order. The cumulative effect of America's wars against Afghanistan and Iraq was a diminution of American power and prestige around the world. The financial burdens of the two wars, no less than their political damage, led the United States to begin a policy of gradual retrenchment. The war against Iraq in particular disrupted the fragile balance of the Middle Eastern regional system. The Arab state system collapsed under the weight of its fissures, its deepening legitimacy crisis, and its inability to deal with the need for change. To boot, the American war against Iraq had the unintended consequence of raising Iran's profile and making it not only the predominant regional power in the Persian Gulf but also an Eastern Mediterranean power due to its organic links to Hizbollah in Lebanon. The increasing Iranian influence exacerbated Israeli apprehensions and anxieties about the Islamic Republic particularly because of its nuclear program.

Both September 11 and the Iraq War ultimately benefited Turkey too. If September 11 gave the world a taste of the jihadist dystopia, Turkey certainly stood as an antidote and an antithesis to it. Turkey's historically shaped characteristics provided an example to the world in general that another type of politics was possible than either the stagnant Arab Middle Eastern one or the messianic Iranian one or the violence-worshipping jihadism. Soon the ascent to power of the AKP, a party with an Islamist pedigree, would make the Turkish experiment even more of a shining example.

When the AKP came to power in 2002, many of the decision makers in the Turkish state and among the public were vehemently opposed to the Iraq War. Although the AKP negotiated with the US to allow the deployment of American troops on its territory so that a northern front could be opened, the Parliament ultimately rejected the government's decree. Turkish-American relations were thus severely bruised. This refusal and the subsequent internment of Turkish special operations soldiers by American

troops in the town of Suleimanieh in northern Iraq on July 4, 2003, were the flash points of the deterioration in relations and a source of anti-Americanism.

The truth is, though, that Iraq was already a source of tension in bilateral relations since the invasion of Kuwait and Operation Desert Storm. It crystallized the divergence of views between Turkey and the United States, or between the interests of an aspiring regional power and the global power, in the post-Cold War setting. It exacerbated on the Turkish side fears of an independent Kurdistan to the south of its border and raised suspicions of US connivance in that project.

Despite warmer relations in the second half of the 1990s, close cooperation to finalize the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that turned Turkey into an energy transport route and the celebration of a vaguely defined "special partnership," the two sides never really sorted out their potential disagreements. In the absence of a mutually agreed-upon framework for moving these relations forward, accidents could and ultimately did happen. As far as Turkey was concerned the Iraq adventure produced all the results that Ankara warned Washington about. Turkey also had to face and deal with the mostly negative consequences of this expedition. In order to do so, Ankara took many initiatives even before the war began.

After the war, Ankara was unresponsive to American demands that it downgrade its relations with Iran, a member of the "axis of evil," and Syria. On the other hand, Turkish cooperation with the US in Iraq continued despite great dissatisfaction with the level and quality of US help in fighting the separatist PKK. In the meantime, Turkish efforts to integrate the Sunnis into the political process, Ankara's ability to speak with all the Arab Iraqi parties, and its constructive initiatives for mediation gained the genuine appreciation of all concerned parties.

In fact, Turkish foreign policy became ever more active and the domestic developments favoring civilianization and democratization

of the polity gradually loosened the grip the Turkish military had on devising the policy towards Iraq and its Kurds in particular. The second Bush administration, after the appointment of Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense, changed America's approach towards Turkey. The most important sign of this change came at the conclusion of the critical meeting between President Bush and Prime Minister Erdoğan in Washington on November 5, 2007. The President then called the PKK "an enemy of Iraq, Turkey and the US" and gave the green light for providing actionable intelligence to the Turkish military. Thereupon, Turkish policy towards the Kurds shifted dramatically. Economic integration and political cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government intensified.

The Turkey that relied heavily on its hard power that shunned the Middle East, where the military called all the important shots, segued into a Turkey that was capable of deploying its soft power. It set an example of a country that could integrate its Islamists into the political system, continue in its democratic practices, and show impressive economic growth. Arab citizens discovered Turkey in ever growing numbers, just as a Turkish television series started to dominate prime-time airwaves throughout the region. As Turkey's policy toward its neighbors gradually became less confrontational, the benefits of the Israeli alignment became relatively less impressive than before. In the meantime, the architect of that alignment on the Turkish side, the military, was fast losing political ground as a result of intensive civilianization of the polity. Many of its members were indicted for alleged coup plots, and other illicit activities. Therefore the Turkish-Israeli relationship needed new columns to stand on.

In its foreign policy, the AKP committed itself to the principle of "zero problem" with the neighbors, moved in to fill the vacuum created by the United States, and volunteered its good offices for mediation in the long-standing conflicts of the region, particularly those that concerned Israel. The problem was that the

two countries had diverging visions for the Middle East, and their policy preferences and approaches were increasingly irreconcilable. Turkey increasingly sees itself as a regional power and seeks to be America's main partner in the region. Under the rubric of "model partnership," Ankara believes that it has a chance to forge such a relationship that will inevitably come at the expense of Israel's most favored status. Increasingly a competition over strategic supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean is surfacing between Tel Aviv and Ankara and partially provides the background to the developments related to the flotilla raid and its aftermath. Turkey wishes to have a Middle East order that is based on economic integration, political stability and peace. Achieving peace is seen as the precondition of political stability, and economic integration was expected to consolidate that stability. Ankara believed Israel's current policies were blocking this path of regional integration.

The centerpiece of Turkey's Middle East policy was Syria. The Turkish government gave cover to the Syrian regime at its most vulnerable when former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri of Lebanon was murdered and Damascus was suspected of masterminding the deed. Turkey put great energy, despite US objections, into brokering a Syrian-Israeli deal in 2008. The fury of Prime Minister Erdoğan in the wake of the Gaza war in part stemmed from the fact that the war killed an Israeli-Syrian agreement that the Turkish side believed was almost struck during Ehud Olmert's visit to Ankara days before Operation Cast Lead. Today a similar fury is directed against President Bashar el Assad of Syria for ignoring Turkish pleas to initiate reforms and stop killing its citizens. The Syrian opposition convened four times in Turkey and the American administration and the AKP government are in regular contact to better synchronize their policy vis-à-vis Damascus.

Finally, not only did Turkey continue to engage Iran, despite criticism that Tehran uses these efforts to gain time for further nuclear enrichment, but Ankara also raised the issue

of Israel's nuclear arsenal on every platform. The decision of the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference that invited Israel to open its nuclear program to scrutiny proved that Turkey's persistence on this matter paid off. The AKP government tried to engage Tehran in bilateral relations and improved trade and investment. It pursued a line that was different from its Western allies concerning Iran's nuclear program. It went so far as brokering a swap deal on nuclear fuel along with Brazil. Then Ankara voted against Iranian sanctions at the UN Security Council. That last move certainly irritated the Obama administration, and subsequent developments suggest that the Turkish government has learned its lesson as well. In truth, Turkey's Iran policy is more complicated than meets the eye as Ankara is in competition with Tehran for influence in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and, most importantly, Iraq. From that perspective, the trip to Iraq by Prime Minister Erdoğan in March 2011 when he visited, as a Sunni head of government, Najaf, prayed at Ali's shrine and paid a visit to Ayatollah Ali Sistani, assumes critical importance. Finally, the Arab revolts fundamentally altered the strategic environment and the parties' calculations. Turkey, for a decade, banked on the established regimes to pursue its policy of engagement. That order has now collapsed. Nowhere is the failure of pursuing "constructive engagement" more evident than in Syria. But the AKP's and its kindred organizations' links to some opposition movements in the region will place Turkey in a comfortable position to adjust to the new political realities.

As the Arab world goes through convulsions that are likely to last a long time and the US shifts its strategic attention eastward, the partnership between Ankara and Washington will become ever more critical. The US administration does recognize Turkey's potential role and supports the main tenets of its foreign policy. Yet recent developments that brought Turkish-Israeli relations to a breaking point, despite American efforts to avoid a crisis, is likely to put strains on bilateral relations.