



OBAMA, ROMNEY, AND THE FUTURE OF TURKEY-UNITED STATES RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT The 2012 American presidential election features two candidates, incumbent President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney, with contrasting foreign policy visions for the United States, particularly with regards to the Middle East. How could these differences between the two candidates affect bilateral relations between the United States and Turkey, which—aside from Israel—is generally seen by the United States as its most stalwart ally in the Middle East? This paper will examine the recent history of bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States, from the George W. Bush administration to the Obama administration, as well as current issues surrounding relations between the two countries. It will also explore how the predicted policies of each candidate could impact the future course of bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States.

Introduction

Conventional wisdom suggests bilateral relations between the United States and Turkey are unlikely to change dramatically, regardless of whether Barack Obama or Mitt Romney is elected President in November. “There is a ceiling above which Turkish-American relations cannot improve, and there’s a floor which it can’t go below,” observed Bülent Aliriza of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in 2010 (Schleifer, 2010). Yet in the first two years after Obama took office in January 2009, relations between the

United States and its closest ally in the Muslim world appeared to grow increasingly strained under the weight of several high-profile diplomatic skirmishes. Remarkably, only a few of these skirmishes concerned the bilateral affairs of the United States and Turkey alone; instead, the growing rift between the two countries can largely be traced to each country’s bilateral relations with some third state—particularly Iraq, Iran, and Israel.

Aside from Israel, Turkey is arguably the United States' most important ally in the Middle East. In 2011, Obama logged more phone calls with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan than with any other head of state in the world except for British Prime Minister David Cameron (Richter, 2011). History has shown time and time again that predicting how a presidential candidate will act once he takes office is less an inexact science than a parlor guessing game. Still, there is ample evidence to suggest that not only do Obama and Romney hold divergent views on the Middle East, but their views diverge in important ways that could have significant consequences for the future of Turkish-United States relations. As changes and reforms sweep over the Middle East and Iran's nuclear program continues to pose a threat to regional stability, Turkey will become an ever more important partner to the United States in navigating the undulating landscape of the Middle East—a partnership that could potentially be destabilized in 2013 if a new president takes office.

Background

As the sole predominantly Muslim country with which the United States maintains a formal allied agreement (through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO), Turkey has enjoyed a relatively close relationship with the United States since at least the end of World War II, when, as a primary beneficiary of the Truman Doctrine, it received over \$100 million in special military and economic assistance (see Truman, 1947) to help

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ensure its continued control of the Dardanelles, a strategic passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean which was the target of Soviet demands for joint control in the aftermath of World War II. In an address to a joint session of Congress, President Harry S. Truman (1947) declared, "It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures", paving the path for the delivery of over \$400 million in military and economic aid to Greece and Turkey, both of which joined NATO in 1952 (Truman, 1947).

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bilateral relations between the United States and Turkey in the mid-2000s.

Loğoğlu (2010) characterizes the relationship between the two countries as “under permanent siege on the American side” (Ibid.), citing constant attacks from “the hostile Armenian Diaspora and Greek and Greek Cypriot lobbies” in the United States, resulting in “an element of chronic suspicion and distrust in the Turkish mindset about American decision-makers” (Ibid.). Indeed, bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States endured further strains in the later years of the Bush administration due to what Turkey perceived as the United States’ failure to clamp down on training camps established by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK, or *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*), a group seeking an independent Kurdish state, in northern Iraq. (Both Turkey and the United States consider the PKK a terrorist organization.) On October 17, 2007, the Turkish Parliament took a defiant stance against the United States by voting to send military personnel into northern Iraq in pursuit of members of the PKK, though no military operation was ultimately carried out. Only a week earlier, Turkey had recalled its ambassador to the United States in protest of a resolution passed by the United States House of Representatives seeking to call the World War I-era massacre of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire a “genocide”. According to Nasaw (2010) the resolution ultimately died in Congress after “intense lobbying by the Bush administration”, though a similar resolution was introduced in 2010—with a similar response from Ankara.

Perceptions of US as a Threat

What countries or groups pose the greatest threat to (survey country) in the future? [open ended, accept up to three responses]

% saying United States

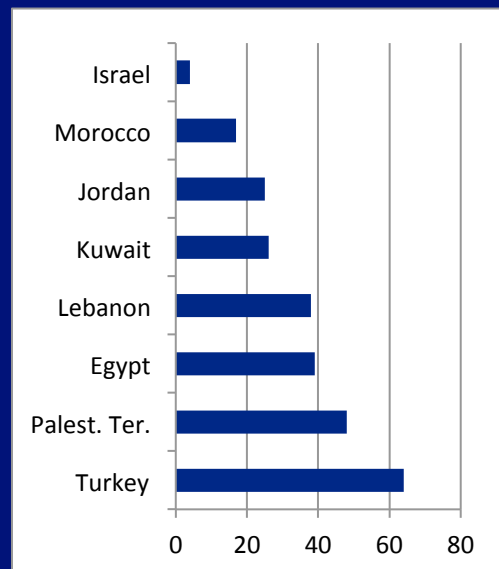


Figure A. A 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Survey revealed that 64% of Turkish respondents cited the United States as their country's greatest threat in the future, a significantly higher figure than respondents from several major Middle Eastern countries.

The Obama Era: 2009–Present

When Barack Obama entered office in January 2009, bilateral relations between the United States and Turkey were at one their coolest points since the United States’ arms embargo against Turkey in the mid-1970s. Obama’s addition of Ankara to what the *Washington Post*’s David Ignatius (2012) called “an otherwise

predictable European itinerary for his first overseas trip in April 2009” signaled to many observers on both sides of the Atlantic that Obama was determined to not only normalize, but strengthen, bilateral relations between the United States and Turkey in the aftermath of George W. Bush’s presidency:

Some people have asked me if I chose to continue my travels to Ankara and Istanbul to send a message. My answer is simple: *Evet*. Turkey is a critical ally. Turkey is an important part of Europe. And Turkey and the United States must stand together—and work together—to overcome the challenges of our time. (Obama 2009)

Obama’s message came at a time when the United States’ reputation in Turkey was in tatters: a poll released only two weeks after Obama’s visit indicated that “44 percent of the Turks saw the United States as the biggest foe” while only 4 percent thought the United States was Turkey’s “most important friend” (Hürriyet, 2009). This figure represented an almost one-third decline from 2007, when 64% of Turkish respondents considered the United States their country’s greatest threat in the future (see Figure A). A report by Hürriyet indicated that Prime Minister Erdoğan said “the Turks, who became one of the most anti-American nations in the world in the wake of the U.S.-led war in Iraq in 2003, held Bush and the Republicans responsible for the worsening of bilateral ties” (Ibid.) between the United States and Turkey.

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Remarkably, the most optimistic indicator for the future of Turkey-United States relations, according to the 2009 poll, was Obama himself: 39.2 percent of Turks viewed the American president favorably, compared to 9.2 percent of Turks in 2005 (after Bush’s reelection). “The question that needs to be answered is if the Turks’ confidence in Obama could reflect positively on Turkish-American ties”, (Ibid.) Erdoğan said at the time, specifically citing the United States military’s future efforts to combat the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq as a linchpin of bilateral relations between the United States and Turkey: “Any future that will be taken by Obama to help Turkey combat the PKK could have positive implications on Turkish-American relations” (Ibid.).

A 2012 Congressional report indicated that the United States, under President Obama, did indeed increase its cooperation with Turkey in combating the PKK in northern Iraq, writing: “Turkey has increased air and artillery attacks on PKK safe havens in Iraq, aided by intelligence-sharing from the United States, and has reportedly involved ground forces across the border as well” (Zanotti, 2012). As it turned out, however, the PKK would not play a significant role in bilateral relations between the United States and Turkey until the PKK’s resurgence following the Turkish national elections in June 2011. Instead, it would be Turkey’s controversial support of Iran’s nuclear program—and the concurrent deterioration of Turkey’s once-friendly relationship with Israel—

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Turkey has long maintained a policy of neutrality in the clashes that would sometimes emerge between powers in the Middle East. It was one of the first countries to recognize the new government in Tehran after the Iranian revolution in 1979, and it functioned as a neutral trade route between both Iran and Iraq and the world during the Iran-Iraq War in 1980–1988. Yet as tensions between Iran and Israel escalated in the mid-2000s amid suspicions that Iran’s initiative to launch a civilian nuclear program was concealing a larger effort to enrich weapons-grade uranium with the aim of becoming a nuclear power, Prime Minister Erdoğan has become an increasingly outspoken critic of Israel and the United States’ efforts to halt Iran’s nuclear activities. In a state visit to Tehran in October 2009, Erdoğan offered his unqualified support of Iran’s “right to peaceful nuclear energy” (Reuters, 2009) and sharply criticized the broad sanctions on Iran placed by countries such as Israel and the United States: “I think that those who take this stance, who want these arrogant sanctions, need to first give these [weapons] up. We shared this opinion with our Iranian friends, our brothers” (Ibid.). In July 2010, President Obama signed into law an extension of economic sanctions on Iran, as well a penalty on any company or individual found to aid Iran’s petroleum sector. Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad responded to Erdoğan’s remarks by praising what he called

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Erdoğan’s “clear stance against” Israel (Ibid.).

Prime Minister Erdoğan made an unscheduled visit to Tehran in May 2010 with Brazilian president Lula de Silva to sign a trilateral nuclear declaration with Brazil and Iran, in which Iran agreed to temporarily store a significant amount of its low-enriched uranium in Turkey in exchange for highly-enriched uranium to be used in one of Iran’s research reactors.

The removal of a significant quantity of uranium off of Iranian soil was one of the primary goals of the United States and other countries that had pushed for increased sanctions on Iran in the previous months; however, the May 2010 agreement would still leave Iran with about half of its current supply of low-enriched uranium—“about enough fuel for one nuclear weapon if it chose to make one”, according to the New York Times (Sanger & Slackman, 2010). “My expectation is that after this declaration there will not be a need for sanctions,” Prime Minister Erdoğan said at the time (Hafezi & Exman, 2010). The Obama administration disagreed pointedly, however, with Robert Gibbs, the White House press secretary, saying: “While it would be a positive step for Iran to transfer low-enriched uranium off of its soil as it agreed to do last October, Iran said today that it would continue its 20 percent enrichment, which is a direct violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions” (Sanger & Slackman, 2010).

The deal raised more than a few eyebrows in the United States, but the Obama administration’s disappointment with Tur-

key must certainly have been tempered by an understanding of the reality of Turkey's relationship with Iran. According to Parsi: "In 2009, Iranian-Turkish trade stood at around \$11 billion, with Iran providing a significant portion of Turkey's gas needs" (Parsi, 2010). As long as Turkey's relationship with Iran could be framed in terms of Turkey's economic interest, then concerns about Turkey making an ideological shift away from the west—even at the hands of Turkey's center-right Justice and Development Party (AKP, or *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*)—appear to be overstated.

Far more troubling to some western observers, however, is Turkey's increasing alienation from another historical ally: Israel. Turkey was the first predominantly Muslim country to recognize Israel, and Prime Minister Erdoğan is one of the few leaders of a predominantly Muslim country to have visited Israel, assuring then-Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon during a 2005 state visit that his party, the AKP, viewed anti-Semitism as "a crime against humanity" (Ünal, 2012). According to *The Economist* (2005), Erdoğan also "added that Iran's nuclear ambitions were a threat not just to Israel but to 'the entire world,'" a position that he has clearly retreated from in recent years.

On May 30, 2010, nine activists—eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American with dual citizenship in Turkey and the United States—were killed during an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) raid of the *Mavi Marmara*, a member of the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla," a convoy of six ships organized by the Free Gaza Movement and the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian

Relief (İHH, or *İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı*) carrying over 600 pro-Palestinian activists, journalists, and humanitarian aid workers. The flotilla of ships, which had been stationed off the coast of Israel for less than a day, were carrying humanitarian aid and construction materials with the intention of breaking the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the Gaza Strip. Israeli forces raided the flotilla on the night of May 30 in the international waters of the Mediterranean Sea, boarding the ships using speedboats and helicopters. According to Israeli accounts, the IDF faced resistance on the *Mavi Marmara* from about 40 İHH activists who were armed with iron bars and knives. During the struggle, nine İHH activists were killed; dozens of İHH activists and seven IDF soldiers were also wounded.

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A diplomatic crisis ensued in the aftermath of the May 2010 flotilla raid, threatening to collapse bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey. Immediately following news of the deaths of nine activists—all with Turkish ties—Turkey recalled its ambassador, cancelled joint military exercises it had held with

Israel, and called for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council. Prime Minister Erdoğan referred to the IDF operation as a "bloody massacre" and "state terrorism" in an address to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (Wurzel, 2010).

Significantly, despite its close ties with Israel, the United States joined Turkey in pressing Israel to formally apologize for its execution of the flotilla raid. According to *Yedioth Ahronoth*:

Clinton spoke with Netanyahu, asking Israel to apologize to Turkey for killing nine of its citizens aboard the Gaza-bound *Mavi Marmara* ship in May 2010. However, Netanyahu made it clear that given the current situation in the Middle East, Israel will not issue an apology. . . . The US administration applied heavy pressure on Israel to apologize to the Turkish government over events surrounding the May 2010 raid. The Americans wish to stabilize Israeli-Turkish relations as soon as possible. (Somfalvi, 2011)

The Obama administration's demand that Israel apologize to Turkey for the flotilla raid deaths signaled to both Israel and Turkey that the United States would not simply align its foreign policies with those of Israel or necessarily take Israel's side in a bilateral dispute between Israel and another country—even one that is predominantly Muslim. Israel's refusal to apologize to Turkey for the raid has produced significant consequences for bilateral relations between the two states; in September 2011, Turkey expelled Israel's ambassador from Turkey. At the United Nations General Assembly in September 2011, President Obama personally asked Erdoğan to resolve its diplomatic crisis with Israel. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also met with Erdoğan and "urged him not to do anything to worsen its relationship with Israel" (Benhorin, 2011).

By the end of 2011, bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States were markedly improved from their low point in the mid-2000s under George W. Bush's presidency. In September 2011, Turkey agreed to host an American-deployed early warning radar in the eastern Turkish city of Malatya "as part of a NATO-approved missile defense system that most analysts believe is intended to

counter potential ballistic missile threats to Europe from Iran," according to a 2012 report prepared by the Congressional Research Service for the United States Congress (Zanotti, 2012, p. 20). The report quotes a senior Obama administration official as calling this agreement "probably the biggest strategic decision between the United States and Turkey in the past 15 or 20 years" (Ibid.). In response to Turkey's agreement to host the NATO-approved missile defense radar, some Iranian officials reportedly cited the radar as a potential target in the event of an American or Israeli airstrike on Iran. General Amir Ali Hajizadeh of head of the aerospace division of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, was quoted as saying: "Should we be threatened, we will target NATO's missile defense shield in Turkey and then hit the next targets" (Dareini, 2011).

The Next Era

Since President Obama oversaw the American withdrawal from Iraq on December 18, 2011, thus ending the Iraq War, a central question for the future of bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States might actually depend on how much further relations deteriorate between the United States and a country with which Turkey maintains friendly relations: Iran. On September 9, 2012, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney assailed President Obama's approach to Iran, telling host David Gregory on *Meet the Press*, "The president has not drawn us further away from a nuclear Iran and in fact Iran is closer to having a weapon, closer to having nuclear capability than when he took office. This is the greatest failure, in my opinion, of his foreign policy" (Benari, 2012). Romney added that his approach to Iran's nuclear ambitions, unlike Obama's, would reject

“a policy of engagement with [Iranian president Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad” and consist of “crippling sanctions” against the Central Asian country (Ibid.).

In a 2012 address to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), President Obama said that he would “take no options off the table” when it came to dealing with Iran’s nuclear ambitions, including military action:

I have said that when it comes to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, I will take no options off the table, and I mean what I say. That includes all elements of American power: A political effort aimed at isolating Iran; a diplomatic effort to sustain our coalition and ensure that the Iranian program is monitored; an economic effort that imposes crippling sanctions; and, yes, a military effort to be prepared for any contingency. . . . Iran’s leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And as I have made clear time and again during the course of my presidency, I will not hesitate to use force when it is necessary to defend the United States and its interests. (Obama, 2012)

Obama’s words, however, must be read in the context of his audience: his address is directed to a lobbying group that explicitly advocates for pro-Israeli policies to the American government. While Obama has implemented what the *National Journal* has called “the toughest sanctions ever imposed on the Iranian government, including new measures targeting, for the

first time, Iran’s entire financial system” (Sorcher, 2012), he has consistently avoided the rhetoric of warfare and, throughout his presidency, sought to reduce rather than further escalate American involvement with the Middle East.

However, when we examine what Romney has indicated he will do with regards to Iran, it does not appear that his suggestions are at all a radical departure from what President Obama has already done: that is, impose strong sanctions and

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keep the military option on the table. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that while Romney appears to have a more hard-lined attitude towards Iran, there is little evidence to suggest that either he or Obama would launch a pre-emptive military

action against Iran, even as the country continues to work towards fulfilling its nuclear ambitions.

Romney has said little about Turkey, but it appears unlikely that he will maintain the strong relationship that Obama has enjoyed with Erdoğan since 2009. For one, his campaign website states that the “United States must forcefully resist the emergence of anti-Israel policies in Turkey and Egypt, and work to make clear that their interests are not served by isolating Israel,” (Romney for President) indicating that, unlike Obama, Romney will advocate for Israel’s side in any bilateral dispute between Israel and Turkey. Also unlike Obama, who has spent his presidency reducing American involvement with the United States, Romney advocates for increased American intervention in the affairs of the Middle East—a space that will undoubtedly at times place the United

States squarely against Turkey: “[The Middle East] is riven by tensions, and Iran and Islamist extremists are seeking to influence events and expand their control. The future of democratic institutions in the region—and the security of the United States and its allies—hangs in the balance. . . . [T]he United States cannot be neutral about the outcome” (Romney for President).

Conclusion

It seems that, in the end, the positions of President Barack Obama and challenger Mitt Romney on issues relevant to the United States’ bilateral relations with Turkey are not that different, yet Romney is unlikely to enjoy the warmth of Obama’s relationship with Prime Minister Erdoğan—a relationship that has been the linchpin of the optimistic direction that bilateral relations between the two countries has taken since the darker years of the Bush administration.

If Romney is elected President, it is unlikely that he would name Erdoğan as among the five world leaders with whom he has the most trusted relationship, as Obama did in an interview with Fareed Zakaria in 2012. “I think that if you ask them, [German chancellor] Angela Merkel or [Indian prime minister Manmohan] Singh or [South Korean president Myung-bak] Lee or Prime Minister Erdoğan or [British prime minister] David Cameron would say, we have a lot of trust and confidence in the President,” Obama told Zakaria (2012). In the end, if Romney is elected president, then the outcome of bilateral relations between the United States and Turkey may depend more upon both countries’ relations with Iran, Israel, and other Middle Eastern countries than ever before.

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ABOUT GPoT

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