

TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS PAST AND FUTURE

Turkish-American relations are important not only for the countries themselves but also for the stability and peace in the strategic region where Turkey is located. These relations have to be strengthened in every area possible. US and Turkey should be very careful to understand each other in dealing with the problems which will inevitably arise during the process. There are sensitivities on both sides which should be approached carefully without being too assertive. Instead of blaming each other for mistakes done in the past, it is absolutely necessary that each country shares the responsibility and looks for solutions acceptable to their public.

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- Historically, Turkish-US relations were important for both countries. Although at in the beginning, and particularly until the 1990s, relations largely revolved around military grounds, for the past fifteen years efforts have been made to diversify the nature of those relations as should be the case between two equal partners.
- For domestic political reasons, Turkish-American relations are still being characterized as being a “strategic partnership.” In my view, it is not possible to define those relations as being strategic. For example, American-Israeli relations can be more naturally characterized as being strategic. Since both countries closely follow the same line of policies without hesitation. However, in so far as relations with Turkey are concerned, one cannot claim unwavering togetherness. Furthermore, I do not think there is any need for such unity of action. The United States today, in a unipolar world, not only carries the responsibilities of a super power but also seems to keep its long term national interests above those of others. It is impossible to claim that this policy is befitting to Turkey’s own particular issues of national character and her particular interests which have their roots in history.
- In the 90’s, the notion of ‘enhanced partnership’ relations was introduced. Within this enhanced partnership scheme, attempts were made to diversify and develop relations not only in the military field but also economic, commercial, cultural and social fields. Along this line, the Turkish-American Joint Economic Commission, which had lost its effectiveness for many years and had been neglected, began to function again. The first meeting of the Joint Economic Commission took place in Ankara with the participation of high level officials from various concerned departments and institutions from both countries. Subsequent meetings were held in Washington and Ankara alternatively and decisions were made to resolve existing problems that were obstacles to the development of relations. Follow-up was not as efficient as one would have expected. Nevertheless, a number of improvements were enacted bureaucratically.
- In spite of the anti-Turkey lobbying carried out for decades by the Armenians and the Greeks with the active support and assistance of the Orthodox Church, American administrations were careful not to do anything harmful to the existing relations. Unfortunately, with the armed intervention of the British and American forces in Iraq and the ensuing developments, these relations have suffered their most severe blows. Among the main reasons was the fact that there was an inexperienced new government in Turkey. This government, without due respect to Turkey’s democratic parliamentary regime, created great expectations in Washington where it received support and encouragements. The Turkish government neglected the fact that the Turkish Grand National Assembly would have the final word. Surrounded by inexperienced and inefficient advisors, the Turkish Prime Minister was received twice in Washington with red carpet treatment. He pledged that Turkey would act as a “strategic partner” implying that authorization would be granted for American troops

to cross Turkish land space and enter Northern Iraq. Taking this pledge for granted, American troops boarded ships, and dispatched them to the Mediterranean and the American technical teams leased land in South East Anatolia and started to set up a logistical infrastructure.

- The rejection of the draft resolution submitted by the government to the Turkish Parliament on 1 March 2003 reflected the opinion of a large majority of the Turkish people. This Parliamentary rejection brought about a very undesirable crisis in bilateral relations. It would be unfair to blame this crisis entirely on the Turkish government. In my opinion, the American administration and its advisors also played a significant role. Those advisors who misled the American administration after meetings with their Turkish counterparts in hotel lobbies over a cup of coffee or dinners, tried to put the blame solely on Turkey. Thus, they tried to evade their own responsibility and save their reputations resulting in a deepening crisis.
- Following this crisis, the incident during which US soldiers ambushed a number of Turkish special forces and put sacks over their heads, referred to as “the sacking incident,” created an unacceptable situation for the Turkish people. This act was not at all compatible with friendship and alliance. Kurdish actors in Iraq played an active role in this incident, which was perceived by the Turkish public as a conscious effort to take revenge on Turkey for the 1 March 2003 Parliamentary action. Other incidents which followed the sacking incident, such as the siege of Telafer city by the Kurdish Peshmergas and American Armed Forces as well as the behaviours of Talabani and Barzani bringing Kurds from other regions of Iraq to and around Kerkuk and granting them the right to vote in general elections, perpetuated the Turkish public's negative image of the USA. Finally the promises made by the US to lend a helping hand in the fight against the terrorist actions of the PKK/KONGRA-GEL terror organization were not kept, thus rubbing salt into an open wound. These unfortunate incidents coming one after the other were the basis for the offense that the Turkish people feel for the American administration.
- The US Administration has made it clear that it expects Turkey to remedy these adverse developments in bilateral relations. The Assistant Secretary of Defense Doug Feith and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made this clear during their respective visits to Ankara. In order to bring the relations back to their former level and further develop them, Turkey, as well as the United States of America, should revisit their past mistakes and assume their share of responsibility. The US Administration absolutely must take the sensitivities of third countries into account more carefully and act accordingly.
- Let us hope that the draft resolution to be submitted to the US Senate regarding the so-called “Armenian genocide” will be rejected as in previous years. The passage of such a resolution by the American Congress, which amounts to legislating history rather than leaving it to the historians, would constitute a major blow to bilateral relations. It is imperative that the American Administration fights against the passage of such a resolution in keeping with the long term interest of both countries.
- At this juncture, it is of a premodial importance, for the sake of their future relations, that both countries act very cautiously and rationally.