

## **Turkish-American Relations in Transition: Taking Stock of Obama's Legacy**

**Tarık OĞUZLU\***

As the Obama administration is coming closer to its end in the United States, it would be worthwhile to take stock of Turkish-American relations as it has evolved in recent years. When Obama came to presidency in 2009, he paid one of his early visits to Turkey. At that time the expectation on the part of traditional American allies, Turkey being no exception, was that with Obama the unilateral and neoconservative stance in American foreign policy would come to an end and the United States would reenergize its relations with traditional allies in a multilateral fashion and within existing institutional platforms. In the speech he delivered in the Turkish Assembly in the spring of 2009, he praised Turkey's decades-long Westernization/Europeanization/modernization efforts and pointed out to Turkey as a successful role model for the developing and modernizing states of the wider Middle East. In the fight against extremist Islamism, he underlined Turkey's potential role to act as an inspirational force for moderate Islamic polities in their efforts to successfully merge traditional Islamic values with liberal democratic values of developed countries.

Turkey's soft-power oriented European practices in its foreign policy across the Greater Middle East on the hand and Turkey's ongoing internal transformation alongside the EU accession process on the other attracted US admiration. The so-called 'zero problems with neighbors' policy that Turkey pursued since 2002 till the early stages of the Arab Spring seems to have also increased Turkey's strategic and ideational value in the eyes of American.

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\* Prof. Dr., Rektör Vekili, Uluslararası Antalya Üniversitesi. E-posta: rektor@antalya.edu.tr

Despite the controversy over Turkey's joint efforts with Brazil to find a solution to the nuclear problem between Iran and the international community as well as the steep deterioration of Turkey's relations with Israel in the wake of the so-called Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, Obama administration continued to invest in the idea of Turkish model. This became particularly evident in the early stages of the so-called Arab Spring process. In the eyes of the US elites, there existed a consensus that the kind of Islam practiced in Turkey as well as Turkey's economic and political accomplishments throughout its Republican history, most notably during the reign of the Justice and Development Party governments, would offer a credible road map to the Middle Eastern societies which had finally begin to oust their repressive authoritarian rulers from power. Rather than looking to Iran as a role or the region descending into further chaos and anarchy, the United States would likely acquiesce in Turkey's political stewardship of the revolutionary movements engulfing the entire Middle East. If the installation of democratic regimes in these countries were to be seen as the panacea for petrified regional problems and the the United States were now to give more emphasis to democratic transformation of the region in a bottom-up manner, partnering with Turkey would appear to be one of the wisest strategies to pursue.

Another reason that would give further boost to the so-called 'model partnership' between the United States and Turkey, which President Obama underlined in his speech in the Turkish Parliament in 2009, was the evolving American foreign policy strategy under Obama's watch. According to this strategy, the United States would do well to encourage its traditional allies in key regions to take on more responsibility in the solution of regional problems and the idea of American military involvement in war-torn countries in the wider Middle East, particularly insofar as it relates to nation-building attempts, should be thrown into the dustbin of history.

That said, the gradual phasing out of American military presence in the Middle East, following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, can be seen as an important factor enabling such countries as Turkey to play more assertive roles in the post-Arab Spring era. From today's vantage point, everything would have likely transpired according to the book, had the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya produced functioning democracies in Turkey's image and the war in Syria come to end with the removal of Assad from power and the institution of representative state structures in Damascus at the early stages of the civil protests.

However, such expectations soon proved to be futile and Turkey's relations with the United States began to experience a tumultuous process. A number of factors need to be mentioned in this regard. First, Turkey and the United States soon discovered that they were not always on the same page concerning the developments taking place in the Arab Spring afflicted countries. Unlike the United States and many other countries Turkish rulers defined the ous-

ting of Moursi regime in Egypt from power by General Sisi in July 2013 as a military coup. Rather than readjusting their ideational approach towards the Arab Spring protests against the political developments on the ground, Turkish rulers continued to believe that Turkey's principled attitude towards the Arab Spring was morally superior than pragmatic and realpolitik calculations of other actors and would eventually pay dividends.

Second, Turkey did not mend its relations with Israel despite the personal involvement of President Obama in the dispute during the spring of 2013. At the urge of Obama, the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu even apologized to Prime Minister Erdogan for the killing of Turkish nationals aboard the Mavi Marmara. Even though Obama tried to mediate between Turkey and Israel and encouraged the leadership of both countries to find a face-saving formula that would pave the way for normalization in bilateral relations, no breakthrough has occurred till now. Despite the recent efforts to get out of the crisis situation and finally reach a satisfying agreement, the Turkish-Israeli relations are still fragile. Even though Israel seems to have met two preconditions of Turkey before the normalization process to begin, namely the apology and the compensation, the parties are still far away from finding a formula as to how to satisfy Turkey's demand that embargos on Gaza region be removed once and for all.

Third, the ones who argue in the United States that Turkey's membership in NATO should be questioned do also refer to the already existing differences between the two countries as to how to solve the Syrian crisis as well as deal with the emerging security challenges in the Middle East. As of today, Turkey and the US seem to have different priorities in Syria with Turkey defining the PKK-affiliated PDY as the number one security challenge levelled against its territorial integrity whereas the Americans viewing PYD as the most credible ally on the ground against the Islamic State.

While Turkey is still of the view that the long-term solution of the Syrian debacle could only come through the ousting of the Assad regime from power, the United States appears to have given the priority to defeating ISIS and looking for a diplomatic solution through the involvement of moderate opposition groups, Assad regime, important regional players and most importantly Russia. While Turkish rulers are categorically against the Russian military involvement in the crisis on the side of the regime and still exploring the possibility of helping establish a no-fly zone in the north bordering Turkey, the United States has long come to the point that Russian cooperation is required to find a lasting solution on the ground. That said one would not be exaggerating to say that the Americans felt uncomfortable with Turkey shutting down a Russian military aircraft in late 2015. From the American perspective, any confrontation with Russia is something unwanted, for tension with Russia has already increased lately due to the Ukraine crisis. Neither the US nor other members of NATO would like to see that Turkey's worsening relations with Russia inadvertently culminate with further geopolitical tension with Russia.

Fourth, the Obama administration has also demonstrated its disappointment with the end of the so-called peace process that the JDP government had initiated with a view to finding a political solution to the decades-old Kurdish problem at home. On the other hand, the more securitized an approach Turkish rulers adopted towards the Kurdish problem at home, the more Turkey began to criticize the growing cooperation between the United States and the PYD in Syria. From Turkey's perspective, the PYD is the Syrian branch of the PKK and therefore should be enlisted as a terrorist organization. However, the US administration is predisposed to treat the PYD as a political group to be reckoned with in the context of the military struggle against the Islamic State.

Fifth, from the perspective of the American administration, the Turkish government feels extremely relaxed to make use of anti-American feelings in internal politics. Putting the United States among a bunch of external actors conspiring against Turkey's territorial integrity and well-being is not the kind of political behaviour that the United States expects from its allies.

On the other hand, Turkish rulers feel extremely upset whenever they see the United States approach Turkey from an instrumental perspective and easily overlook Turkey's sensitivities in the Middle East. The adoption of the so-called 'leading from behind' strategy and 'retrenchment' policies by the Obama administration over the last seven years have not struck a sympathetic chord with Turks. Rather than pivoting to Far East and Southeast East Asia and outsourcing the task of providing security to its regional players, Turkey wants the United States to invest more political and military capital in the solution of existing security problems in the Middle East. From Turkish perspective the hasty withdrawal of US troops from the Middle East, without the regional actors developing the capability of providing their own security, has proved to be a strategic mistake. Worse, that the Obama administration has not provided the moderate Syrian opposition with credible military capabilities and eschewed the use of force when Assad resorted to chemical weapons in late 2013 seem to have caused further consternation in Ankara.

Sixth, even though Turkish rulers view the latest deal concerning the elimination of Iran's nuclear weapons capability positively and welcome the prospects of Iran's incorporation into regional and global power politics as a legitimate and responsible actor, they cannot help but think that the recent polarization in the Middle East along the Saudi Arabi-Iran axis as well as the transformation of Iraq and Syria into non-governable areas are mainly due to wrong American policies.

## **Conclusion**

Against the background as mentioned above, one can now confidently presume that the years ahead will likely see Turkey and the United States increasingly develop a transactional relationship between each other. At a time when non-Western global powers are posing strong claims to global leaders-

hip and challenge the primacy of Western-led liberal order, the capability of the West, particularly the United States, to have a decisive influence on Turkey's domestic and foreign policies will likely diminish. Combined with the EU's diminishing capability to act as a credible international actor as well as maintaining its soft power and legitimacy in the eyes of its members and candidate countries, the gradual erosion of Western actors in global politics will likely result in more transactional and realpolitik than value-driven long term cooperative relationships between Turkey and the United States. This does not need to be categorically wrong, yet the danger is that unless Turkey evolved into a powerful regional actor having solved its structural problems at home and unless the regional security environment in which Turkey finds itself got transformed into a more secure and stable condition, the transformation of Turkey's relationship with the West in general and the United States in particular into a primarily realpolitik-oriented transactional relationship will likely offer Turkish rulers more short-term relief than long-term opportunities to become a successful liberal democracy having the ability to play transformative roles in neighboring areas.