

The Future of the U.S.-Turkey Relationship

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Remarks at the Atlantic Council of the United States (ACUS)
Washington, DC
September 13, 2007

I am pleased to be back at the Atlantic Council to discuss what is one of the most critical relationships for America in the world today -- the relationship between the United States and Turkey. Fred, thank you for hosting me tonight. I appreciate the invitation by Fred Kempe and the Atlantic Council Board to be here. Thank you to Henry Catto, Chairman emeritus of the Atlantic Council. Thanks to Ambassador Marc Grossman for his warm introduction. It is a pleasure to see the Ambassador of Turkey, Nabi Sensoy, the Ambassador of Armenia, Tatoul Markarian, Ambassador Mark Parris and Jim Holmes here tonight.

This is an important moment for the relationship between the United States and Turkey. Turkey has just elected a new government. Our countries now need to enter into a new era of our relationship and to commit to a revival of our very close friendship and alliance.

I will visit Ankara and Istanbul soon to bring a strong and clear message from our leadership -- the United States is committed to revitalize this critical partnership. Restoring a sense of strategic partnership in the broad range of U.S.-Turkish relations -- extending beyond government-to-government cooperation to a flowering of private sector ties between our people -- will be a major priority for the United States in the coming months. It is indeed time to rejuvenate and restore America's relationship with Turkey.

The Turkish people have just concluded important, even historic elections. These elections demonstrated the strong health of Turkey's democracy, the most impressive in the Moslem world. The result was a decisive and Turkey can now expect a period of renewal and growth at home and responsibility and challenge in its foreign policy. The United States government looks forward to a very close relationship with President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan. President Bush and Secretary Rice respect both of these men. We have worked very well and productively with them in years past and know that will continue in the years to come. We would like to agree with the newly-elected Turkish leadership on a period in the coming months of high-level visits, discussions and joint commitment to face together the challenges of stability and peace in the Middle East.

Turkey, after all, has been one of our closest friends for over 50 years, dating back to the Truman Doctrine and the Korean War, and anchored by our Alliance in NATO. Throughout this long period, Turkey has always been among the United States' most dependable and important allies in an otherwise turbulent region. We look to Turkey, with its 160-year legacy of modernizing reform, as the most successful example in the world today of a secular democracy within a Muslim society that can inspire reformers in the greater Middle East and beyond.

Turkey's importance to the United States is even more pronounced at a time when the Middle East in the 21st century has replaced Europe in the 20th century as the most critical region for America's core national security interests. Turkey is the only country in the region that can work

effectively with all of the others in the Middle East. Turkey's influence is substantial and unique. In this very important sense, Turkey is an indispensable partner to the United States in the Middle East.

Our history of close relations, shared interests, and common values makes Turkey one of the most important Allies of the United States anywhere in the world. That is not to say that our relationship has been perfect: we have certainly endured our share of difficulties, misunderstandings, and miscommunications in recent years. From our perspective, 2002-2005 were particularly difficult, but we believe we have turned the corner together with the Turkish leadership. We now have a moment of opportunity to build stronger ties at all levels between our governments. For the past two years, especially, our leaders have worked with considerable energy to revive the relationship and to address more effectively the common challenges and opportunities before us.

One glance at the map demonstrates why it is so important to strengthen the ties between our two countries. Turkey is influential in the Balkans, in the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and in the greater Middle East. In this vitally important arc of countries where so much of our foreign policy attention now lies, Turkey is the vital link for the United States and our European allies in addressing common economic, security, and political challenges and opportunities in these critical regions.

On perhaps the most dynamic international issue of 2007 -- energy -- we share a common interest with the Turks. Turkey is the gateway for exports of oil and natural gas from the Caspian region and Iraq to Europe. Building on our successful cooperation in the 1990's to develop the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the South Caucasus gas pipeline, we now seek to expand this critical energy infrastructure into a Southern Corridor to help our European allies -- Greece, Italy and into Western Europe -- create a free market for energy supplies in Europe. These efforts can also help Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan bolster their own independence by providing them access to European energy markets.

We hope it will be possible for Turkey to arrive at a swift agreement with Azerbaijan on transit terms. Turkey should also strive to find a pricing formula for future exports to Turkey from the Caspian Sea natural gas field of Shah Deniz, a necessary step to complete the inter-governmental agreement for the Turkey-Greece-Italy gas pipeline. Over the longer term, Turkey should continue to cooperate with the United States and our friends in Iraq, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan to expand gas production and exports to Turkey and onward into Europe.

In South Asia, Turkey is helping NATO to bolster regional security in Afghanistan, having twice commanded the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and now leading a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Wardak Province. Turkey has been an important arbiter between Afghanistan and Pakistan, providing a welcoming, neutral venue for Presidents Karzai and Musharraf to discuss issues of mutual significance.

It is in this area that we feel Turkey could make even more of an impact. Turkey could offer assistance to repatriated Afghan refugees from Pakistan, help both sides improve border management and customs collection, or support the emergence of Afghan-Pakistani Reconstruction Opportunity Zones, as the U.S. plans to do.

Turkey has also played a key role in Kosovo, where it has 660 personnel in KFOR and took over command of Multinational Task Force-South in May. The Turkish government is playing a similarly constructive role in the extended Black Sea region, where Turkey's Operation Black Sea

Harmony cooperates with NATO's Operation Active Endeavor in the Mediterranean Sea to deter terrorism and bolster maritime security along NATO's southern and eastern flanks. Turkey should encourage its neighbors to undertake democratic reform, fight corruption and organized crime, as well as look for ways to improve market economies in the region. The U.S. would like to work with Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria to take greater advantage of opportunities to expand NATO's activities in the Black Sea region.

And, Turkey is playing a regional leadership role in the Middle East. Turkey's common borders with Iraq, Iran, and Syria provide an opportunity to advance peace and stability, fight proliferation of nuclear weapons, and defeat terrorists in a region that is now the epicenter of U.S. foreign policy. Turkey can help deepen our understanding of strategic trends in the Middle East, while reinforcing our efforts to advance political and economic freedom and fight terror to advance peace and prosperity.

It is not only geography and common interests that make Turkey a key U.S. partner; it is our shared values of democracy, diversity, and tolerant faith that make us friends and allies. The United States and Turkey share a deep appreciation for the importance of separating civic and religious life. In Turkey, reform movements during the late Ottoman period aimed to balance the claims that religion makes on personal lives with the exigencies of a modern state. One of the most famous waves of reforms, the so-called "Tanzimat" movement of the mid-19th Century was an attempt to give all residents of the empire the same rights, whether they were Muslim, Christian or Jewish. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk rejuvenated Turkey's modernizing reforms, as he granted political rights to women, laid the foundation for Turkey's industrial rise, and established the Turkish Republic as a secular democracy. Turkey's commitment to secular democracy makes it a natural ally for the United States.

Turkey may now be at a new historical turning point, with a real opportunity to invigorate political and economic reforms that will anchor it in the European Union and bolster its ability to inspire reformers in the greater Middle East region. Parliamentary elections on July 22 and the election of Abdullah Gül as president on August 28 demonstrated once again that Turkey is a robust and ever-maturing democracy, one that is defined by respect for constitutional processes, with the country's political future determined by elections. We welcome Mr. Gül's election as President. President Bush and Secretary Rice have good relationships with President Gül, and Prime Minister Erdoğan, and look forward to developing these relationships.

The Justice and Development Party, or AKP, now controls the government, parliament, and presidency. At the same time, Turkish voters sent a message of moderation during the recent elections. While the AKP won a resounding victory, opposition parties received over 50 percent of the vote, and with more parties crossing the 10 percent electoral threshold the new parliament is more representative of Turkey's diverse voter sentiment. Turkey's voters thus appear to have signaled their desire for Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Gül to deepen Turkey's secular democracy by rejuvenating political and economic reforms, but in the context of Turkey's Muslim society.

As Turkey's democratic institutions strengthen and as its reforms proceed, Turkey grows in importance to the U.S. as a strategic partner. Realizing the full potential of this partnership poses several immediate challenges to both of our countries. In the Middle East, Turkey can play a regional leadership role that could help the U.S. achieve some of its most pressing foreign policy goals, but which will require careful coordination to prevent our two countries from operating at cross-purposes.

At the top of the list is Iraq. Our decision to liberate Iraq from Saddam Hussein's brutality triggered an unprecedented wave of anti-Americanism in Turkey. Our official relations have recovered from the low-point of the Turkish Parliament's vote on March 1, 2003 to reject our request to move U.S. forces into Iraq via Turkey. Since then, Ankara has been a strong supporter of our efforts to stabilize Iraq, and has asked us not to abandon our goals, particularly safeguarding Iraq's territorial integrity. Turkey represents a critical logistical lifeline for our troops in Iraq and has made important contributions to Coalition operations there.

Turkey is similarly helpful in diplomatic efforts to bolster support for Iraq among its neighbors. The United States appreciates Turkey's willingness to host the next Extended neighbors ministerial in October, an important follow-up to the work begun at Sharm el-Sheikh last May. Secretary Rice announced this week that she plans to attend this meeting in Istanbul.

Turkey's willingness to help the international community address Iraq is all the more appreciated given the difficulties it is suffering as a result of attacks from PKK terrorists in Iraq. Let me assure you, the United States condemns the PKK as a vicious terrorist group. We mourn the loss of innocent Turkish lives in these attacks.

We remain fully committed to working with the Governments of Turkey and Iraq to counter PKK terrorists, who are headquartered in northern Iraq. We are making progress in putting in place the mechanisms required to produce such concrete results against the PKK. We will also follow up our success in working with Turkey and our other European partners to interdict PKK terror financiers in Europe and bring them to justice.

Turkey and the United States also face a challenge in Iran. We have worked well together to support of the clear international consensus demanding that Iran cease its nuclear weapons development programs. Turkey has also proven to be strong partner in countering Iran's support for terrorists in the Middle East.

But the United States and Turkey still need to work out some tactical differences in handling Iran. We understand that Iran is a neighbor of Turkey and key trading partner, which sends over a million tourists to Turkey each year. Turkey's recent conclusion of a memorandum on energy cooperation with Iran, however, is troubling. Now is not the time for business as usual with Iran. We urge all of our friends and allies, including Turkey, to not reward Iran by investing in its oil and gas sector, while Iran continues to defy the United Nations Security Council by continuing its nuclear research for a weapons capability

The United States and Turkey share a common interest in working toward a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. President Bush's vision is of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security. The Palestinian Authority under President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is the most capable Palestinian government since Oslo and is committed to being a partner for peace. As we work to develop the economy and institutions of governance that will form the foundation of a Palestinian state, Turkey understandably can see opportunities to draw on its historical experience from the Ottoman era and its modern economic might to help restore prosperity to the Palestinian people, while drawing on its more recent experience in forging a close security partnership with Israel.

Turkey is unique in its dual identity as both a Middle Eastern and European country. We thus face important challenges in U.S.-Turkish relations with regard to deepening Turkey's integration in Euroatlantic institutions.

We are among the strongest supporters of Turkey's EU aspirations. We call on Europe's leaders to signal clearly and unambiguously that Turkey will have a voice in the European Union in the future. We believe both Turkey and the Euroatlantic community will benefit as Turkey advances toward EU membership. We wish to see an even more democratic and prosperous Turkey, which will make Turkey a stronger partner for the United States in Europe. The prospect of full membership in the EU is the right goal for Turkey and the future of the European Union.

Moreover, Europe's full embrace of a reformed Turkey will send a powerful signal to Europe's other Muslim populations that Islam and democracy are compatible, and that integration into mainstream European society is possible without surrendering one's Islamic identity. This could be a crucial factor in defeating Europe's extremist recruiters, who prey on alienated Europe's Muslim populations. Those Europeans who oppose Turkish membership in the EU should keep in mind that it is not the Turkey of today, but an even more democratic Turkey of tomorrow that would that would join the EU after several more years of reform.

To reach this transcendent strategic objective, we hope Turkey will repeal Article 301 of the Penal Code, which restricts freedom of expression and has led to outlandish legal cases against private citizens and global figures such as Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk. We also hope Turkey will help make its own case with the EU by allowing the Ecumenical Patriarch's religious school at Halki in Istanbul to reopen decades after it closed.

We must also work with Turkey to strengthen NATO. Turkey has been a cornerstone of the Alliance since the 1952, serving as a barrier to Soviet expansion throughout the Cold War. Several generations of Turkish military officers enjoyed formative professional experiences while serving in NATO commands. Today, Turkey is a key NATO partner in Afghanistan and Kosovo, and is emerging as a critical potential partner in the vast majority of NATO's future contingencies, which lie to the southeast of Europe.

An important focus of Euroatlantic security cooperation is developing ways for the EU and NATO to work together in bringing their respective capacities to bear in strengthening stability and security in Kosovo, Bosnia, Afghanistan and elsewhere. We appreciate the difficulties that such cooperation poses for Turkey given the still-evolving Turkey-EU relationship, the circumstances of Turkey's participation in activities within the European Security and Defense Policy, as well as the complications resulting from the lack of a Cyprus settlement.

Yet it is vital for all of us, including Turkey, that NATO and the EU are indeed able to work together in crisis areas around the world. For this and many other reasons, we call on all relevant parties to reinvigorate UN-brokered efforts to reach a comprehensive Cyprus settlement that reunifies the island into a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. We welcome last week's meeting of President Papadopoulos and Mehmet Ali Talat, and look forward to future such meetings to implement last year's July 8 agreement.

I intend to travel to Cyprus this autumn and will communicate to the Cypriot government leadership and the Turkish leadership, as well, the strong wish of the United States that we might all contribute to a breakthrough for peace after decades of crisis. The time has come for the United Nations and all of us to achieve a just solution to the long-festering problem of Cyprus.

Finally, the U.S. and Turkey face a serious challenge with regard to Armenia. Each year on April 24, Armenian Remembrance Day, President Bush has issued a public statement lamenting the mass killings and forced deportations of up to 1.5 million Armenians by Ottoman authorities at the end of World War I. The United States condemnation of this tragedy is not at issue; the question is how best to facilitate reconciliation of all concerned parties with each other and with their painful and shared past. We believe passage of the U.S. House of Representative's Resolution 106, which would make a political determination that the tragedy of 1915 constituted genocide, would undercut voices emerging in Turkey for dialogue and reconciliations concerning these horrific events. We therefore have recommended to Congress that it not pass such a resolution.

We strongly encourage Turkey to normalize its relations and reopen its border with Armenia, steps that will help bring peace, prosperity and cooperation to the Caucasus. Now, in the wake of the AKP's resounding electoral victories, is the time for Ankara to make a bold opening toward Armenia. And we hope that Armenia will respond in kind.

In conclusion, the United States and Turkey have enjoyed a relationship of Allied friendship for over half a century of enormous complexity, success, and promise. We have weathered a difficult period over the past four years. We now stand at the edge of a potentially new era in Turkish politics that offers a chance to restore a sense of strategic partnership in U.S.-Turkish relations.

I will be traveling to Ankara soon to bring this message to the new government personally. The United States is determined to seize this opportunity to renew and strengthen our strategic partnership with Turkey. We look forward to working together with Turkish leaders who share this vision and determination to build this strong, vital and irreplaceable Turkish-American alliance for the 21st century.

Thank you.