

# Testing Times in Turco-American Relations

LAURENCE RAW\*

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## US-Turkey Relations: A New Partnership

By Madeleine K. Albright, Stephen J. Hadley, Steven A. Cook  
Washington DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2012, 83 pages, ISBN 9780876095256.

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## Change and Adaptation in Turkish Foreign Policy

Edited by Buğra Kanat, Ahmet Selim Tekelioğlu  
Ankara: SETA, 2014, 216 pages, ISBN 9786054023325.

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## The Adventures and Confessions of an American Drama Queen in Turkey

By Barbara A. Lawrence  
Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2014, 442 pages, ISBN 9781491859674.

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**T**urkey's relations with the United States have seldom been at such a low point. In late February 2014, 84 former lawmakers, ambassadors and national security advisers sent an open letter to Barack Obama in protest against what they saw as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian policies that significantly compromised the rule of law. A month later, the American government distanced itself from Erdoğan's repeated request to forcibly repatriate Islamic scholar Fetullah Gülen to Turkey. Such moves are symptomatic of a U.S. presidency that does not want to involve itself too much in Turkey's affairs and thereby fuel Erdoğan's complaints that the West

wants to harm him. In any case, criticism from Washington would have little effect on his policies.

This state of impasse seems a far cry from those heady days of 2012, when former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright co-produced a pamphlet outlining new initiatives for Turco-American relations. The authors believe that Turkey should be viewed "as a potential strategic partner with which it has a relationship comparable [...] to that of [...] its closest allies, such as Japan and South Korea." This relationship should be established on "equality and mutual trust; [and] close and intensive consultations to identify common goals" (p.

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9). The authors argue that the United States should help Turkey accomplish the process of political and economic reform by helping them create a constitution that “will advance and deepen Turkish democracy,” based on the idea of secular politics in a Muslim society (pp. 24-25). On the Kurdish issue, the authors recommend that “Washington should privately encourage Ankara to undertake economic, educational and cultural initiatives to ameliorate the situation of large numbers of Kurds,” while pressurizing the PKK to abandon its armed struggle against Turkey (p. 29). In the economic sphere, the United States should promote “better economic futures” for both countries while facilitating “further liberalizing economic reform in Turkey that will spur next-generation economic growth” by creating “agreements to facilitate freer trade in services, strengthen investor protections, and/or bolster competition” (pp. 31-32).

In the wake of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, Albright and her collaborators suggest that Turkey and the U.S. should work towards “a more democratic and prosperous Middle East,” as “Arabs are genuinely interested in the political reforms Turkey took in the early 2000s and its recent economic development” (p. 42). Turkey could assume a leading role in the region by helping the various powers to forge a new status quo that would “recognize Israel, renounce violence, and uphold all international agreements between the Palestinian Authority and Israel” (p. 43). Such proposals seem idealistic, but Albright

and her collaborators believe that they could be accomplished through effective negotiation. The same could also apply to Turkey’s relationship with the European Union; the United States should support Turkey’s membership bid as part of a wider attempt to establish “a Washington-Ankara partnership.” The United States should continue to press what they perceived as unnecessary obstacles for Turkish citizens to obtain Schengen visas (p. 48). The authors think that the European Union was out of touch with contemporary political realities, saying, “as the world changes rapidly, it would be a missed opportunity for [...] the EU membership issue to stand in the way of cooperation” (p. 48).

All in all, the authors conclude that policy-makers in the United States and Turkey should come up with a new set of “innovative ideas” so as to make “a strategic relationship a reality” and thereby take advantage of “a historic opportunity to set ties between Washington and Ankara on a cooperative trajectory” (p. 51).

So what went wrong? For many Turks, especially those from the urban-rural lower middle class, the U.S. symbolizes the decadent West, dominated by internet pornography, Facebook, Twitter and global international brands. As in India, following the recent election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, America failed to grasp the importance of this new middle class for whom religion is more important than secular values. As writer and historian William Dalrymple

suggests, the destabilization of the Middle East – entirely “a mess of our own [the West’s] creation” – has given rise to a new desire to reunite the people under a neo-Ottoman rather than a Kemalist banner, inspired by the television coverage of “Syria and Iraq ablaze, Egypt restive and Israel slaughtering the people of Gaza afresh” (p. 18).

*Change and Adaptation in Turkish Foreign Policy* looks at the shift in Turco-American relations within the framework of Turkey’s Middle East foreign policy. Yevgenya Gaber’s piece argues that while Erdoğan has not necessarily turned his back on the United States, he does believe that Turkey should be treated as “a significant country” with self-reliance and “strategic autonomy” (pp. 80-81). To introduce Western-inspired models of democracy might not be the best move diplomatically. As political scientist Şaban Kardaş observed in 2010, “it might be time for the United States to abandon the search for redefining the [Turco-American] relationship on ‘partnership’ models [...] both parties might consider letting the relationship evolve on an ad hoc basis involving different degrees of cooperation” (p. 81). Washington should embrace a *laissez-faire* approach, expanding the scope for an active Turkish diplomacy in the Middle East and beyond. By such means, Turkey’s distrust of the United States might be minimized. The basic question remains: is Washington prepared to cast aside Albright and her co-authors’ recommendations and create new diplomatic formulations?

Perhaps they might learn something from the way that the U.S. has been represented in the Turkish media. Joshua Carney’s piece concentrates on how such representations have shifted over the last two decades. During the Clinton years, the President was colloquially dubbed Clinton amca (Uncle Clinton), a term denoting both closeness and respect (p. 96). George W. Bush’s aggressive Middle East policy destroyed that image. Obama has repaired it to an extent through the use of photo-opportunities, and many Turks view him favorably because they believe that he might be a Muslim. Obama has gone to considerable lengths to stress that “the U.S. is no longer kissing a baby in need, but dealing with a regional power” (p. 112).

Shama Abdel Fattah examines this regional power status in more depth. At least in its early phases, the Arab Spring presented Erdoğan with a unique opportunity to redefine the political balance in the region with Turkey at the center, embracing a form of government that “eliminates authoritarian regimes and encourages the reconsideration of borders’ functions” (p. 144). The AKP’s policies have been inconsistent; they were initially reluctant to support the overthrow of Colonel Gadaafi, but enthusiastically supported the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Such uncertainty has been compounded by the refugee crisis arising from the Syrian revolution. Ultimately, the Turkish government would like to assert its authority in the region but finds itself constrained by circum-

stances beyond its control. Domestic matters take precedence over foreign affairs as the government tries to deal with the refugee issue (p. 153).

Altay Atli shows that the Turkish response to the Arab Spring has been constrained by economic concerns. In Libya in particular, the government has had to be mindful of its investments, taking into account the requirements of the private sector. To allay concerns that Libya has been “transformed” into an anarchic state, Erdoğan announced as early as December 2011 that the country had transitioned to democracy (p. 186). This statement might not have been strictly true but it helped sustain Turco-Libyan economic links. Atli concludes: “Libya is no more a crisis for Turkey’s foreign policy, but it is likely to be a thorny issue for some time to come” (p. 187). I am not convinced of this conclusion in light of Turkey’s continuing desire for a regional power status but the essay as a whole illustrates the complexities of Turkish foreign policy.

The book rounds off with an analytical piece concentrating on the representation of Syrians in the Turkish media, forming an intriguing counterpoint to Carney’s work on the depiction of the United States. Nermin Aydemir argues that Syrians have been portrayed positively as refugees enjoy a warm welcome from local government officials. The visit of film star Angelina Jolie to the refugee camps proved to be a public relations element, highlighting the government’s work while promoting

a spirit of Turco-American cooperation that far transcends the partnership model proposed by Albright and her collaborators. While there is still a degree of skepticism towards the refugee camps in the Turkish media, this is prompted more by economic concerns than anti-Syrian sentiment. To function as a regional power, Turkey should be welcoming as well as strong, especially to people in need.

*Change and Adaptation in Turkish Foreign Policy* offers a comprehensive and lucid summary of contemporary issues pertaining to the Turco-American relationship and its future. While the book’s conclusions have been overtaken by recent circumstances in Syria and Iraq, it nonetheless offers a convincing blueprint for a way forward on the diplomatic front.

One of the most important aspects of any relationship between two countries is the ways in which individuals of both nations respond to one another. Barbara A. Lawrence’s *Adventures and Confessions of an American Drama Queen in Turkey* chronicles her time spent as an English teacher in the Tarsus region. Some of her conclusions appear wearily familiar as she tries to adjust to the rhythms of life in Turkey. She refers to the education system as “very Orwellian” in its strict regulation of all aspects of student and teacher life (pp. 41, 43). Lawrence feels that she has to be “the best ambassador [for the United States] that [she] can be,” as she is most likely “the only American some of these people have a chance to speak to” (p. 48).

Things start to go wrong when Lawrence visits a state hospital alone and is sexually assaulted by one of the staff. She elects to go to court, a decision deemed courageous by the majority of her (male) Turkish friends, but one that gives her renewed energy. In a triumphant paragraph, she claims that her experience of doing business in the Turkey “expanded [her] horizons and gave [her] new and incredible opportunities to continue to help people [...] By pursuing this case, I had a wonderful opportunity to leave a legacy here [in Turkey] as well” (p. 113). The individualistic characteristic of most Americans gets the better of her; like many diplomats, she believes that her principal *raison d'être* consists of helping people. Maybe she needs to learn how she can help by re-thinking her outlook on life by associating with local people. This would be a true psychological partnership based on equality and autonomy rather than misplaced idealism.

When matters start to go awry, Lawrence's resentment surfaces as she finds herself powerless to influence the court proceedings. She states, “I had nothing but the truth [...] on my side. If life were fair, that should have been enough. However, it's painfully clear that right is not might” (p. 125). She loses the case but becomes so enamored with life in Turkey that she falls in love with Metin, a local businessman, even though his reputation as a womanizer keeps her from believing that the two of them could enjoy a romantic relationship (p. 184).

The writing-style becomes something close to that of a second-rate Harlequin romance as Lawrence describes her life with a man she obviously cannot trust. When robbed of most of her life-savings, as well as her jewelry, she is told by the janitor that Metin would be the most likely suspect. Although exonerating him from blame, she later discovers that he has been spending most of their joint funds on a failed bar venture. The stereotypical Other Woman – Deniz – enters the scene, and Lawrence becomes more and more agitated. Her anger finally boils over when Metin asks for more money to settle his debts. She writes: “I was angry, and I screamed [...] He grasped my hands [...] looked me in the eye and in a voice that was barely audible said, ‘Then we have to divorce.’ [...] With that, he bowed his head, closed his eyes, and said the words ‘Boş ol, boş ol, boş ol.’ These words were enough to nullify a hoca wedding. Metin and I are now divorced” (p. 246). We have no clue as to whether this exchange was conducted in English, Turkish, or both languages. What we do detect, however, is Lawrence's underlying tone of bitterness as she casts herself as the victim of a Turkish man's caprices.

Everything now seems to go wrong for her; she has an altercation with her head of department at her high school, and she has to become accustomed to life alone. After a few more acrimonious encounters with Metin, she leaves Turkey for a new life in Libya during the Gadaafi era. She returns to Tarsus, convinced that Metin “was a pathological liar who

was incapable of telling the truth” (p. 419), even though she has turned herself inside out trying to please him. Readers might feel exasperated with Lawrence’s perpetual whining; she cannot envisage any role for herself other than that of the maligned anti-heroine of an orientalist fantasy, a descendant of those unfortunate women carried off by Arab sheiks in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (for example, E. B. Hull’s *The Sheik* (1920)).

Reading *The Adventures and Confessions of an American Drama Queen in Turkey* makes us realize just how difficult the task of forging closer Turco-American relations can be. Diplomats and politicians not only have to contend with political and

economic realities, but negotiate centuries-old prejudices that continue to shape many foreign visitors’ views of Turkey. Even those possessed of a desire to “help” find their illusions are shattered by the discovery that life in other cultures requires them to make considerable psychological and behavioral shifts. It’s important to listen to others and think about your opinions before venting them. If individuals – as well as government representatives – thought more carefully about this, then perhaps they might understand one another better. ■

### Work Cited

Dalrymple, William. “Caliphate is not about Religion, but Power.” *Guardian Weekly* 190.6 (18-24 Jul. 2014); 18. Print.