

# United States and Turkey: Allies at Odds?

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## ABSTRACT

*Much has been said and written about US-Turkish relations recently. The main reason for that is the fact that the relations have gone through a difficult period when clear disagreements over several issues have emerged. The “flotilla incident” and Turkey’s “no” vote at the United Nations Security Council as a non-permanent member of the Council have given the appearance of a major row between the US and Turkey. Part of the reason for that is Turkey’s ambition to make decisions independently as a sovereign nation, which should be respected by her allies. The US and Turkey may have differences of opinion with respect to Israel and Iran. However, I would argue that the areas of cooperation, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, can only be described as exceptional. Instead of focusing on differences, we need to strengthen and highlight areas of cooperation based on our mutual interests.*

Turkish-American relations have gone through a trying period over the past six months but major areas of cooperation and common interests continue to define the main parameters of the bilateral relationship between the two countries. There are still areas of mutual interests where both the US and Turkey are acting cooperatively with one another.

The most important area of cooperation that comes to mind is Iraq. One of the most important strategic changes occurring is the end of combat operations for American troops in Iraq. It is essential for America, Turkey and the future of Iraq that a government be formed in Iraq that is inclusive of a number of its minority groups as well as the majority. This is essential to create stability, economic prosperity, and full political participation in Iraq. America is not likely to accomplish these goals in Iraq alone and it is fundamental that we obtain the support of the Iraqi leaders, but

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this has to be done working in concert with Turkey.

The unbridled truth is that as America recedes from Iraq either Turkey or Iran is likely to play a greater role in the future.

I think, from any reasonable American

perspective, we want Turkey to play a greater role in assisting the political and the economic development of Iraq. The goals and objectives of Turkey are consistent with the objectives and goals of the US and the Obama Administration in that regard. Likewise in Afghanistan, where the strategic objectives of the American government and the Turkish government are very similar, the fact that there have been differences between the two countries since last spring has not prevented them from cooperating in a very strong fashion.

As the two countries work together on the UN Security Council, and despite the vote on the Iranian nuclear program, there remains a consensus of views between the US and Turkey in terms of the threat an Iranian nuclear weapon program would pose. But there remains a difference of opinion in terms of the methods in which to accomplish the common goal. The challenge will be to make sure that differences of perspective on the methods do not poison the efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. In a unified fashion, America and Turkey can play a more successful role in preventing the creation of an Iranian nuclear weapon. That's where the two countries need to focus, respect their differences, but make certain that the goal is the same.

### **Middle East Peace**

There are differences of opinion on the Middle East peace process but the goals are the same: a Jewish state of Israel with defined and recognized borders that can live side-by-side with a self-sustainable, viable, and demilitarized Palestinian state. America and Turkey share that goal. There is just a difference of opinion as to how we get there. One difference is the way in which we treat Hamas. America correctly categorizes Hamas as a terrorist organization. Hamas was on full display with the murder, in cold blood, of four Israelis, including a pregnant woman, a husband, and two others, just as direct talks between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority were about to start. It is clear that Hamas needs to be treated as a terrorist organization.

Some analysts and Turkish government officials have suggested that excluding Hamas from the Middle East peace process would not be fruitful. However, this

is not a question of excluding Hamas; in fact, America has provided the method in which Hamas can be included and it's a fairly reasonable method. The US has asked them to simply acknowledge Israel's right to exist and recognize the agreements that the Palestinian Authority had previously entered into. America has stated that you run a terrible risk when you invite a negotiating party that does not acknowledge the right of a nation sanctioned by the UN to exist. Hamas undermines the process of negotiation through terrorism.

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Turkey has a different view in how to categorize and treat Hamas. I think the American view is correct. However, there may be constructive ways in which Turkey can pursue the goal of Middle East peace given the kinds of relationships it has with the Arab world. Again, while we have differences, we have to make certain that the differences don't undermine our common goal.

### **The Flotilla Incident**

The prevailing view in America, as it relates to the Flotilla Incident, is that Israel has the right of self-defense and to enforce a blockade to make certain that Hamas does not receive more weapons than it already has. However, a trap was laid and, unfortunately, the Israelis stepped into that trap, leading to nine people being killed. Turkey wonders why there isn't more outrage in America over the confrontation that occurred and the deaths that resulted. America doesn't view the Flotilla as an isolated incident. Instead, the Flotilla is viewed as the culmination of a series of inflammatory incidents in which tensions were raised through statements that inflamed public opinion more than necessary. When someone plays with matches too often, they will get burned and this is what occurred with the Flotilla.

The Israeli government warned the Turkish government not to allow this ship to proceed. The Turkish government may have taken security measures, in respect to many of the participants including the international group of people that participated, to ensure they were peaceful. But there are reports that the ship stopped a second time after the initial search where another 80 or so participants who may have avoided Turkish security and joined the ship. Those 80 people had no interest in a peaceful demonstration in opposition to the Israeli policy in Gaza. They were people looking for a physical confrontation and the video evidence makes it clear that the Israeli soldiers that boarded the ship were confronted with a violent group of people hoping to do physical harm to them.

It is tragic that nine people died but most Americans are not going to reach the conclusions that the Turkish government hopes us to reach. The American perspective does not dispute that the incident happened in international waters, but what is subject to interpretation is “what is the law that governs in this circumstance?” and whether or not Israel had the right to do what it did. Arguments have been made by both sides. Ironically, Hamas doesn’t adhere to international law in any respect.

Although the Flotilla Incident has damaged Turkish-Israeli relations, I am hopeful that, at a minimum, Israel and Turkey’s relationship will improve in a fashion that is representative of the strong relationships they have developed over the years.

### **Turkey’s Policy towards Iran**

There seems to have been a true misunderstanding between the American and Turkish sides with regard to what was expected of Iran and what the bare minimums Iranians had to accomplish were. Both sides need to work carefully to ensure that this does not happen again. I do not agree with those who argue that Turkey intended to undermine American policy on Iran. I believe that Turkey was pursuing a path they believed was consistent with American goals and objectives and that Turkey’s intention was to act in a positive manner for the purpose of stopping Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

There was a clear misunderstanding that resulted in Turkey voting “no” at the UN Security Council and that vote has had significant impact on the bilateral relations, making things especially difficult in Congress. Personally, I would have preferred that Turkey voted in a different way in the Security Council but it’s not fair or appropriate to impugn to Turkey motives by claiming that they were trying to undermine America or to draw itself closer to Iran.

There is a very important role for Turkey to play: it has a unique position in regards to its ability to communicate with all the Iranian leaders. I continue to believe that America and Turkey share the same objective but have a fundamentally different view as to how to get there. Turkey has regional interests that may at times be different from American interests. The challenge is to take those differences and channel them in a positive way. In the case of the Security Council vote, however, the channeling was anything but positive.

We can expect Iranian nuclear issue to complicate matters because there is a different point of view and we should not sugarcoat that. There is a great deal



Photo: AA, Kayhan Özer

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of good will on both sides to work together so as to pursue the same objectives without getting ourselves in that kind of diplomatic confrontation again and I think there were lessons learned on both sides. Most importantly, Turkey needs to continue to act in a way so that those of us who argue that we have mutual interests on Iran are proven to be correct.

### **The Role of the Israeli “Lobby” on US-Turkey Relations**

The president, the administration, and the secretary of state are the ones who determine American policy towards Turkey. Congress has its particular role to play as well. Decision makers in the US are influenced by the points of view of a variety of sources of information in America. The American Jewish community, to the degree that you can articulate a single method or approach, which is never the case, is one of many important actors in our political process. However, the behavior of countries is what determines our policies, not the desires of a particular group or actor. In the context of Turkey, their work on the UN Security Council and their cooperation with us in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as on a whole host of other issues speak volumes. A single issue or group could not shape

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our policy towards Turkey. Our relations are much more diversified and comprehensive than that.

It is true that there are those people, particularly in Congress, including some important actors in the American political process, who seek to “redefine” our relationship with Turkey as a result of recent events. In that context, there are suggestions to rethink our military

sales to Turkey to somehow punish Turkey for not cooperating fully with the US. However, I would offer a more sober approach in that acting in a punitive way towards Turkey will not advance America’s national security interests. We need to work on areas that we, in fact, share both objectives and methodologies and highlight those areas of cooperation; two allies should work together trying to minimize the impact of those differences.

Turkey has considered carefully the American requests in many areas and working together cooperatively has been possible in many instances. We have yet to see the outcome of the talks over missile defense systems the Obama Administration is seeking to station in Eastern Europe and perhaps Turkey. It is hard to predict how a Turkish refusal of stationing of missile defense systems on Turkish soil might impact bilateral relations. Both the US and Turkey will calculate their own national security interests and make their own sovereign decisions. Turkey is a democracy and the US has to respect that. Yet, it is also important for allies to respect the needs of each other. Missile defense systems have the potential to strengthen the relations depending on the decisions made.

There are differences of opinion and even disagreements between Turkey and the US on several important issues. However, I am hopeful that the areas of mutual interest will play a much more prominent role in our bilateral relationship.