



BULLETIN

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Prospects of Turkish–American Relations Following U.S. Elections

by Adam Szymański

Contrary to concerns that have arisen in Turkey, the electoral victory of Barack Obama is unlikely to bring about a deterioration of relations between Turkey and the USA. Indeed, an improvement could even ensue in certain areas, although tension-breeding problems will remain. The general shape of relations between the two states will largely depend on whether the United States reckons with the geopolitical significance of Turkey and makes use of this country's potential, for instance in stabilizing Iraq. Another important question is whether Turkey is prepared to meet U.S. expectations half-way, seeking a compromise on controversial issues and thus making cooperation with the USA a component of its strategy for enhancing its regional position.

Under the George W. Bush presidency relations between Turkey and the USA had their ups and downs. The strategic partnership between the two states weakened in the wake of the 2003 intervention in Iraq. This was followed by new tensions and by a deterioration of the United States' image among the Turks. Only in 2007 did contacts improve as the American side engaged more actively in suppressing the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Iraq, Turkey commenced—in line with U.S. expectations—talks with Kurdish regional authorities in northern Iraq, and the campaign for a Congress resolution designating the massacre of Armenians as genocide was discontinued.

The electoral victory of Barack Obama warrants a moderately optimistic view of the future of the Turkey–U.S. relations. They are unlikely to deteriorate in the aftermath of the election, despite earlier apprehensiveness of Turkish political elites, worried how these relations would turn out after the coming to power of the Democrats, whose approach to foreign policy is seen by the Turkish side as liberal and idealistic. It is difficult to say at this point who will have a decisive say on U.S. foreign policy, in particular in the Middle East. It could well be to Turkey's advantage that Joe Biden, criticized by Turkey for his adverse position on Iraq and Cyprus, is unlikely to be playing the main role. As for Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and National Security Advisor James Jones, they are knowledgeable about Turkish affairs (the latter two contributed in the past to improving bilateral relations) and, being realists, they could modify the American Turkish policy by highlighting this state's geopolitical importance for the USA. President Obama himself is popular among the Turks, largely for his declared commitment to pulling out troops from Iraq and phasing out unilateralism from foreign policy.

Middle East and Afghanistan. The new administration's Iraq policy could have positive influence on the Turkey–U.S. relations. Collaboration in fighting the PKK in the northern part of Iraq will continue. The United States has already confirmed that intelligence-sharing will go on and it pronounced PEJAK, the outlawed Kurdish organization, a terrorist group. Presumably, the American side has also influenced the stance of regional Kurdish authorities, which promised to blockade PKK enclaves. Yet Turkey must be prepared for increased pressure from the USA, which will want military operations against the PKK to go hand in hand with the development of relations with the regional Kurdish authorities and urge reforms aimed at solving the Kurdish problem. If large U.S. forces are deployed in northern Iraq to protect the Kurds' interests, tension could ensue. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq could enhance American–Turkish cooperation, provided the Americans take sufficient care

to stabilize that state and preserve its territorial integrity. In such a case the USA will need Turkey's help, for instance to set up a regional stabilization group, using earlier Turkish initiative which encompasses Iraq's neighbors.

President Obama has promised a multilateral Middle East policy that will rely to a greater extent than before on diplomatic measures—which could imply involvement in the peace process and attempts to establish dialogue with Iran and Syria. This would be good for the Turkey–U.S. relations, which so far have been complicated by the U.S. policy of isolating Iran and Syria, with whom Turkey is on good terms. The Turkish side could help the USA by acting as intermediary in talks between the parties to conflicts in the region. Yet the United States will remain pro-Israeli, though Obama might adjust his predecessor's position; meanwhile, Turkey's attitude towards Israel has become stricter following the much-criticized intervention in the Gaza Strip. Unless the Turkish government takes a more rational and balanced attitude, it will cease to be regarded by the USA as a reliable intermediary in the peace talks. Iran, too, could remain an issue in the Turkey–U.S. relations. Presumably, if diplomatic means of pressure fail, economic sanctions on Iran will be proposed. Turkey, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, could see itself pressured by the USA to support the sanctions. This, however, would be a difficult step, for not only do the Turkish authorities remember unwelcome consequences of the sanctions imposed on Iraq, but they pin high hopes on supplies of Iranian gas for domestic use and on its transit to Europe through Turkish territory.

It is difficult to predict how the USA's Afghan policy will impact Turkish-American relations. Obama wants the international military force in Afghanistan to be increased. Turkey, its involvement in Afghanistan already high, will be unwilling to make an additional contribution. Yet, as refusal to increase support would undermine confidence in Turkey as the USA's NATO ally, the Turkish side might eventually boost its aid to the Alliance, but it would expect in return American support on other issues—for instance, that Turkey's interests be taken into account in the settlement of the issue of Kirkuk in the north of Iraq. At the same time, Turkey will be the USA's important partner as an intermediary in talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

European Union, Cyprus and the Armenian Issue. After the elections, the Turkey–U.S. relations could become more closely linked with Turkey's relations with the European Union. If the transatlantic relations improve, as promised by Obama, this could enhance, in the longer run, the effectiveness of American support for Turkey's bid for EU membership. Yet this support will depend, more than previously, on the progress of democratization in Turkey. If the present sluggish pace of reforms in Turkey continues, this could affect the country's relations not only with the European Union, but with the U.S. as well. The United States' position late in 2009, when the EU is due to take a decision on the continuation of accession negotiations with Turkey (the chief criterion being whether Turkey opens its sea- and airports to Republic of Cyprus' ships and planes), will be relevant to the future of relations with Turkey.

Under the Obama presidency the Turkey–U.S. relations could be soured by the Armenian issue. Earlier activities of some members of the new administration and electoral promises suggest that the killing of Armenians could be proclaimed genocide in a House of Representatives resolution and in the president's address on 24 April, a day for commemorating the 1915–1916 events—which would chill mutual relations. Unlike President Bush, who had promised such steps but never delivered on his electoral promises, the new administration appears more determined on this issue and a shift of position of the pro-Israeli lobby in the USA makes the recognition of genocide more likely. To date the lobby has blocked the passage of the resolution, but now that Turkey's policy towards Israel has become sterner, this attitude could change. As it decides on whether to recognize the killing of Armenians as genocide, the new administration will probably be led predominately by the state of Turkish–Armenian relations. If they improve, the USA might choose to refrain from raising the matter of the massacre of Armenians. The pragmatism of the new administration and the results of increasingly intensive activities of the Armenian lobby in the USA will also play a significant role.

Conclusions. The Turkey–U.S. relations can be expected to improve in a number of areas, yet certain tension-breeding issues will remain. The overall shape of mutual relations will be largely a resultant of U.S. and Turkish respective policies towards regions of importance to both, the Middle East in particular. It will also depend on whether pragmatism and the continuation of a policy pursued by the Bush administration towards the end of its term—of taking into account Turkey's regional aspirations and certain sensitivities—prevail, and whether Turkey acts rationally and pursues a foreign policy which, under the incumbent Justice and Development Party government, has been more compromise-oriented and showed a balanced approach to the parties to regional conflicts and (at least till 2005) the will to institute democratic reforms.