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US-TURKISH RELATIONS: NEW DYNAMICS AND NEXT STEPS

May 14, 2009

**Testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives,
Subcommittee on Europe and Emerging Threats**

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be with you today and to share some thoughts on the state of US-Turkish relations and next steps.

This discussion takes place at an important moment in a relationship often – and correctly – described as “strategic.” After eight years of pronounced strain in relations with Turkey, President Obama’s April 2009 visit to Ankara and Istanbul has changed the style of our engagement with Turkey. In his speech to the Turkish parliament, and in other settings, the President managed to convey genuine appreciation for Turkey’s regional role, and sensitivity to Turkey’s own national interests. To be sure, the President went to Turkey with a set of requests and preferences, not least on Afghanistan and Iran, and the President’s remarks in Turkey touched on some sensitive issues. But the difficult discourse of the post-2001 period seems to have been set aside in an effort to repair America’s very badly damaged image with the Turkish public and policymakers, and a pervasive climate of mutual suspicion. In the wake of the visit, leaderships on both sides should look to turn this public diplomacy success to operational advantage.

Both sides should have reasonable expectations. Observers sometimes characterize the relationship during the Clinton Administration as a “lost golden age” in US-Turkish relations. Despite the often troubled relations in recent years, and especially since the Iraq War, it is important to recognize that the bilateral relationship has had many periods of real strain, not least in the mid 1990s with frictions over human rights, northern Iraq, strategy against the PKK, Cyprus, Aegean stability and other

issues. In other critical areas, including the Balkans and Afghanistan, cooperation with Ankara has been excellent. On the big picture issues of Turkey-EU relations, energy security, relations with Russia, and stability in the Middle East, bilateral relations continue to be “strategic” in the sense that cooperation between the US and Turkey is essential to the policy objectives of both sides.

The fact that President Obama scheduled a visit to Turkey so early in his Administration is significant. Just as significant is the fact that the visit came as part of a high-profile European tour. Symbolism counts for a good deal in relations with Ankara, and in this case, the geopolitical symbolism of visiting Turkey after the G-20 meeting in London and the NATO Summit in Strasbourg was meaningful. In subtle ways, the nature of the itinerary has shaped interpretations of the visit. Many of the key topics on the bilateral agenda may have been Middle Eastern or Eurasian – Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – but the policy dialogue in Ankara and Istanbul was a dialogue with a *transatlantic* partner. The importance of this can be demonstrated by a simple thought experiment: imagine the discussion that would have surrounded a presidential visit to Turkey as part of a Middle Eastern tour – Riyadh, Baghdad, Cairo, Jerusalem and Ankara. An itinerary of this kind might be useful at the working level, but it would have sent a very different message about the overall character of US-Turkish relations and Turkey’s place in transatlantic institutions.

The US faces three parallel challenges in managing and recalibrating the relationship with Turkey. First, we must address accumulated problems of style and perception in the relationship. Second, we need to address specific, near-term policy issues where US and Turkish priorities could be more closely aligned. Third, we should understand and anticipate some longer-term, structural issues affecting the relationship, including Turkey’s own trajectory and future dynamics in US-Turkish-EU relations.

The Public Diplomacy Challenge

The German Marshall Fund of the United States and others have charted the marked decline in Turkish public attitudes toward the US in recent years.¹ The scope for revitalizing relations with Ankara will be determined, in large measure, by the new Administration’s ability to encourage and sustain a more positive image with the Turkish public and policymakers. This is especially important because public opinion counts in today’s Turkey, and the Turkish leadership pays careful attention to popular

¹ See *Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings 2008* (Washington: German Marshall Fund of the United States).

attitudes in shaping foreign policy. In this sense, Turkey is very much in the European and Western mainstream. The last few months have seen a marked improvement in Turkish perceptions of American leadership and, to an extent, American policy (polling from March 2009 suggests that around 50 percent of the Turkish public hold positive views of the new US president).² President Obama's visit reinforced this warming trend, and opens the way for efforts to improve cooperation in specific areas of concern. A good deal of public and political-level suspicion has been defused, and this is significant given the stresses of recent years.

Turkish observers, including the AKP government and opposition parties, are interpreting visits by the President, the Secretary of State and other high-level US officials, in light of their own preferences, and to support differing visions of Turkey's role and identity. Turkey's heated debate about secularism and religion, geopolitical priorities and international affinities, can be a minefield for bilateral relations, even under normal conditions. In the context of a high-profile visit—only the second strictly bilateral visit of the Obama presidency—the risk of a serious political misstep was greatly magnified. In recent months, US officials have managed to steer a skillful course between the widely disliked “Turkey as model for the Muslim world” discourse, and the equally unrealistic notion that Turkey's cultural and religious background are irrelevant to the country's international role. Turks across the political spectrum will remain highly sensitive to any sign of American interference in the country's domestic affairs, and US policymakers are well advised to hold Turkey's internal frictions at arms length.

In Turkish perception, the only evident misstep during the visit was the President's reference to Turkey's Kurds as a minority. In Western political vocabulary this is a straightforward observation; not so in Turkey, where the term “minority” has a specific constitutional meaning. On the Armenian issue, the approach was nuanced and non-committal, and therefore open to interpretation by Turks seeking reassurance that the new administration will oppose passage of the Armenian “genocide” resolution now pending in Congress. The President's remarks rightly made the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations the central factor in the American approach. It is worth noting that Turks have reacted more critically to President Obama's carefully worded April 24th statement on Turkish-Armenian relations and the events of 1915. Turks will continue to be especially sensitive to the style of American engagement, and will carefully measure Washington's language and actions where these touch on questions of history and Turkish sovereignty. The key challenge is to prevent the bilateral discourse on the most

² Infakto Research poll, March 2009.

sensitive public diplomacy issues from undermining the basic fabric of US-Turkish relations. Recent interactions with Ankara have made a good start on changing the style, and this can be turned to advantage in improving the substance of the relationship.

The Near-Term Policy Agenda

In broad terms, the US and Turkey share a common policy agenda, but priorities within this agenda continue to differ when seen from Washington and Ankara. On Iraq, Ankara will continue to seek assurances regarding cooperation against the PKK, including the provision of actionable intelligence and renewed pressure on the Kurdish Regional Government to constrain or end PKK activities in Northern Iraq. Turkish officials will seek to build on more extensive intelligence cooperation to acquire new assets for surveillance and counter-insurgency operations against the PKK. As a NATO ally, the US should continue to assist Ankara with this leading challenge to Turkish security. For Washington, the key concern will be Turkish cooperation in support of American disengagement from Iraq over the coming months and years, including contributions to Iraqi political stability and reconstruction, and continued access to Incirlik airbase and Turkish port facilities.

On Iran, Turkey will seek to confirm that the Obama administration is serious about dialogue with Tehran. With its enhanced ties to Iran and close cooperation on energy, the PKK and other issues, Ankara has a tangible stake in the potential for US-Iranian détente. The AKP government has offered to play a role in this process. In reality, it is difficult to imagine the US giving Turkey more than a marginal facilitation role in an initiative of tremendous potential significance to American foreign policy. Seen from Washington, the Iran agenda with Turkey is more narrowly and understandably focused on addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions. Given Turkey's rotating seat on the UN Security Council, US policymakers should give first priority to securing Ankara's support for additional sanctions as required, and to bring Turkey's close relations with Tehran to bear on the problem. Turkish territory is already among the most exposed to proliferation trends in the region, and Ankara has no interest in seeing the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran. But the extent to which the AKP government is willing to deliver tough messages on this score to Tehran is an open question. This may also be a key test of the priorities of Turkey's newly appointed Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, and his ability to balance closer relations in the Middle East with continued strategic solidarity with the US and Europe. Relations with Hamas, and Ankara's overall posture toward the Middle East peace process will be another near-term test.

On Afghanistan, Turkey is no more willing than most of its NATO partners to contribute new forces for combat missions. Turks agree on the importance of the mission but tend to argue that Turkey has already made a strong contribution through its past command of ISAF and its ongoing diplomatic role. Even with a revamped and refocused military strategy, Turkish public opposition to combat operations in Afghanistan will place strict limits on what can be expected in this sphere. This aspect of Turkish policy is very much in the European mainstream, and it is not surprising that President Obama's visit failed to produce any significant new commitments from Ankara. Rightly or wrongly, Turkish policymakers and observers are anticipating a general allied "rush to the exits" in Afghanistan over the coming years.

During his visit, President Obama stressed the importance of Turkey's EU candidacy and left no doubt that the US would continue to be a strong supporter of Turkey's European aspirations. This is an uncontroversial and correct position, very much in line with the policy of successive Administrations. The key question is whether Washington can find new ways of making this case in Europe, and whether any American lobbying on Turkey's behalf can be effective against a backdrop of deepening European ambivalence and waning Turkish patience with the process. An improved climate in transatlantic relations will surely help as the US continues to make strategic arguments about Turkey's importance, and better relations with France can also make a difference. But transatlantic cooperation is likely to be focused heavily on other issues in the years ahead, not least a more concerted approach to economic recovery. How much energy and political capital can be spent on Turkey-EU matters, with a minimum ten or fifteen-year time horizon? President Sarkozy's prompt and critical response to President Obama's comments on Turkey's EU candidacy was consistent with the attitude of many European political leaders. The US simply does not have the standing to press Turkey's case in the way that it could at the start of the accession process. Geopolitical arguments about "anchoring" Turkey can go only so far as the Turkish candidacy moves into a more technical and politicized phase.

After a period of relative neglect, NATO has become more central to US-Turkish relations, and Alliance issues are set to become even more prominent over the next few years. President Obama reportedly played an instrumental role in dissuading the Turkish government from vetoing the candidacy of Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen for NATO's next Secretary General. Turks across the political spectrum were genuinely uncomfortable with Rasmussen as a result of his stance during the Mohammed "cartoon" crisis, and his past opposition to Turkish membership in the EU. In the

wake of a disappointing result in local elections, and pressed by nationalist voices on the right and the left, the AKP government may have felt itself under particular pressure to make Turkish objections clear.

Turkey is among the Alliance members most exposed to the risk of declining political cohesion and strategic drift in NATO. With a critical review of NATO's strategic concept just getting underway, and increasingly heated debates about Alliance posture toward Russia and other issues in which Turkey has a key stake, this is a particularly bad time to squander Turkish credibility and political capital. Turkey's acquiescence in the Rasmussen nomination (and the French return to NATO's integrated military command) are widely understood to have been secured through a series of murky trade-offs on NATO appointments and EU-NATO cooperation. Ankara would be well advised to focus on making its strategic preferences known on questions of nuclear strategy, missile defense and NATO's capacity to act on the myriad, tangible security challenges facing Turkey on its northern, eastern and southern flanks – and the US should take these concerns seriously. Ankara is likely to favor the reinforcement of traditional Article V commitments. Americans and Turks may have some lively differences over the core concepts of territorial defense imbedded in the Turkish vision, versus more global and expeditionary visions for Alliance strategy.

The US and Turkey will benefit from a more explicit discussion about the future uses of Incirlik airbase. This could prove one of the most important areas for dialogue in the wake of President Obama's visit. Both the US and Turkey are quick to point to Incirlik as a badge of strategic cooperation. But a predictable approach to policy planning for Incirlik has eluded successive American administrations and has frustrated defense planners on both sides for decades. Since the days of Operation Provide Comfort (later Northern Watch), an *ad hoc* approach to bilateral uses of the base has prevailed. Neither the Clinton nor the Bush administrations were able to secure Turkish agreement to use the base for offensive air operations in Iraq. The extensive use of Incirlik for logistical support in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot be taken for granted, and could easily be put in jeopardy by future political disagreements. Part of the answer may be to develop new ideas for the use of Incirlik to support a wider range of regional security tasks, from missile defense to maritime security in the eastern Mediterranean – in other words, uses that go beyond the straightforward support of American power projection in Turkey's neighborhood. Better still, many of these uses could be developed in a NATO rather than bilateral context, and linked to new Alliance missions and priorities.

Ankara and Washington have made energy security a key feature of arguments about the strategic importance of Turkey. Turkey can certainly play a role in diversifying Europe's gas transport

routes, and in bringing Eurasian oil supplies to global consumers. Turkey is also a leading conduit for the transport of Iraqi oil, and is part of an increasingly important and well-integrated Mediterranean energy market. That said, it is important to recognize Turkey's own complicated interests in this sphere. These interests include continued access to Russian oil and especially gas – a critical part of Turkey's own energy security equation. Turkey's interests looking north also include a much broader commercial and political stake in relations with Russia. Despite historic sensitivities to Russia as a geopolitical competitor, Ankara will be wary of a more assertive posture toward Moscow, and reluctant to embrace US and NATO initiatives perceived as impinging on Turkish sovereignty and freedom of action in the Black Sea region. To the extent that US relations with Russia become more competitive and contentious, this could well emerge as a source of growing friction between Washington and Ankara.

Longer-Term Questions

Beyond the immediate policy agenda, US policymakers will need to understand and anticipate some longer-term structural issues affecting Turkey, its international role, and relations with the US.

First, the consequences of the global economic crisis need to be taken into account. The crisis is now being felt strongly in Turkey with its export driven economy. This is troubling for Turkey's own development, but it is also a potentially complicating factor in US-Turkish relations. In recent years, Turkey's economic dynamism has broadened the scope for economic engagement with Turkey, and has also allowed Ankara to deploy its "soft power" effectively in neighboring regions. With export markets contracting, and the general flight from risk in emerging markets, Turkey will be a less obvious partner for American business. As European markets weaken, developing markets in Iraq, Syria and Iran may become an important hedge for Turkey, with implications for the balance of Turkish international policy. At the same time, economic stringency could destabilize societies on Turkey's Balkan and Eurasian flanks. The US and Turkey will need new vehicles for regional cooperation in energy, infrastructure and other sectors to counter these troubling risks.

Second, extending and diversifying the constituency for US-Turkish relations should be a key facet of a recalibrated relationship. Turkey's strategic location continues to drive the logic and substance of the bilateral relationship. But this alone is an inadequate basis for strategic partnership. Diversification will be critical to the future of a relationship that has been focused overwhelmingly on geopolitics and security cooperation. The global economic crisis complicates the task of expanding the

relatively underdeveloped economic, cultural, and “people-to-people” dimensions of the relationship. Over the longer-term, a more diverse relationship, with a broader constituency on all sides, is an essential objective. It may also foster greater predictability in cooperation on core regional security issues.

Third, the US should recognize that it has limited leverage over the evolution of Turkish society and politics. That said, US-Turkish relations will be influenced by Turkey’s political trajectory and evolving foreign policy interests. The AKP government is pursuing a more active policy in the Middle East and elsewhere, driven by commercial interests, and a more explicit sense of affinity with the Muslim world. These changing dynamics were clearly displayed in the strong Turkish reaction to events in Gaza. In some spheres, the “new look” in Turkish foreign policy has paid dividends in terms of US interests. Turkey’s role in Israeli-Syrian dialogue, and the deepening détente with Greece are key examples. The rapprochement with Athens is a transforming development, and American policy in the region is no longer driven by the demands of crisis management in the Aegean. Cyprus remains on the agenda, of course, but this is now a political rather than a security dispute – essential to Turkey’s EU candidacy, but no longer a flashpoint for armed conflict. Turkey’s activism in the Middle East and Eurasia is unlikely to be a strategic alternative to relations with Europe and the US. At the same time, Washington will need to think more carefully about the potential costs and benefits of Turkey’s evolving international posture.

Finally, the transatlantic, “trilateral” aspect of relations with Turkey is likely to become more prominent, and this trend should be encouraged. This can be a positive development for US interests, lending greater predictability to cooperation on issues that have traditionally been contentious in a bilateral frame. The progressive “Europeanization” of policies elsewhere across southern Europe has paid dividends in terms of political and security cooperation with Washington. A more positive climate in transatlantic relations, coupled with a reinvigorated Turkish policy toward Europe, would improve the prospects for cooperation with Ankara in many areas of importance to the US. Not least, a trilateral approach will allow American policymakers to support Turkey’s EU aspirations in new and more practical ways.

In sum, President Obama’s visit and recent policy initiatives have managed to dispel some of the pervasive suspicion in US-Turkish relations – no small accomplishment. Much remains to be done, both bilaterally and in a transatlantic setting, to give these public diplomacy gains operational meaning. At the same time, the US will need to keep an eye on longer trends affecting the relationship and Turkey’s role in transatlantic cooperation.