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The Hillary Clinton Impact on Turkish-American Relations

Tarık Oğuzlu



ABSTRACT

There is a new environment that Washington and Ankara may base their relations on dynamic, common interests rather than reified common values and norms. Washington should interpret Turkey's growing regional profile in the Greater Middle East as being in its interests, rather than as a sign of Turkey's estrangement from the West or an aspiration to resurrect the Ottoman Empire. Ankara should try to find solutions to its perennial security problems through democracy and pluralism and respond to US policies on the Armenian issue and Turkey's democratization process in a more rational, rather than psychological or emotional manner. The appointment of Clinton as the new US Secretary of State will produce more positive than negative outcomes on Turkish-American relations during Obama presidency.



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Obama and His New National Security Council

In late November 2008, president-elect Barack Obama announced the members of his National Security Council. The new council consists of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (hereafter Clinton), Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, National Security Advisor James Jones, and US ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice. One of the early reactions to these appointments was that with this council Obama would renege on his election promise of a new foreign policy. It appeared that Obama would simply try to repair the damage inflicted by the long Bush presidency on the image and interests of the United States abroad, rather than orchestrating a radical departure from the major premises of the previous era.

It is worth mentioning in this context that all these names, save Susan Rice, were outside the Obama team during the election period. Clinton was Obama's main rival within the democratic camp and the two held different views on the war in Iraq. While Obama argued against the logic of war in Iraq, Clinton supported President Bush's Iraq campaign. As for Gates and Jones, both could be characterized more realist than liberal, more neo-conservative in their world views than otherwise. Gates had been appointed by Bush to replace Donald Rumsfeld and Jones acted as NATO commander. Although the latter performed a more bureaucratic than political role, both served the outgoing president Bush. This was not the national security team that Obama supporters had hoped to see. In fact, quite a number of Obama supporters expressed

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Hillary Clinton's attitudes toward Turkey will likely be informed by the positive legacy of her husband's presidency.

dissatisfaction with the council whereas several Republicans and members of the Washington establishment praised the president-elect for his preferences.²

Those who have tried to justify this particular decision of Obama argue that he appointed these figures with a particular consideration in mind. According to this reasoning, the president-elect would need time to fix the ongoing economic crisis at home and this NSC would help him buy some time abroad. Despite the harsh criticism leveled against the first term Bush presidency, the last four years have witnessed incremental changes in US foreign policy. Simply stated, Washington has begun to repair relations with European allies; improve the security situation in Iraq and Afghanistan by adopting the so-called "Surge" strategy and engaging locals more than ever; court Iraq's neighbors; and backpedal from the unilateral top-down democratization strategies in the Greater Middle East region. It seems that Obama has taken note of these positive developments and does not want to risk upsetting this progress by changing the course. All the figures in the council have experience in foreign and security policy issues and could help Obama manage the transition period. Moreover, even if Obama were serious about radically transforming American foreign and security policies, his efforts would be seen as more legitimate if they were orchestrated by a council of heavyweights with established credentials. If people who are predisposed to a Republican worldview see Clinton and Gates implementing Obama's new policies, the logic runs, they will more easily embrace them.

A discussion of the impact of the new NSC on US policies deserves a careful and lengthy analysis. This short brief will rather focus on the possible consequences of the appointment of Clinton as the new Secretary of State on the nature of Turkish-American relations in the years to come.

Turkey and the Obama-Biden Duo

When Obama announced Biden's name as the vice-presidential candidate in the summer of 2008, Ankara felt disappointed. Given that Obama was somehow inexperienced in foreign policy issues, it was assumed that Biden would play a key role

in the formulation of US foreign policy in general and the US approach towards Turkey in particular. In the past, Senator Biden did not hesitate to adopt pro-Greek Cypriot positions on the Cyprus issue or to sponsor the so-called Armenian genocide claims in Congress.³ During the 1990s, Biden had argued that military support to Turkey should be tied to Turkey's democratization and the way Ankara treats its citizens of Kurdish origin. Worse, in 2006 he co-authored with Leslie Gelb an op-ed in an influential newspaper suggesting that Iraq should be soft-partitioned among Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds.⁴ He argued that the United States should leave Iraq as soon as possible and that if Iraq could not remain as a unitary state the three main groups should be given the chance of establishing their own states, preferably within a constitutionally federal Iraq. Biden, together with Peter Galbraith, is known in Washington to have actively lobbied for the Iraqi Kurds.

Fuelling Ankara's anxiety has been the assumption that the Obama-Biden duo would also put a particular stress on Turkey's democratization and tie American support for Turkey's EU membership to Ankara's efforts to resolve the Kurdish dispute at home through more political, less military means, and to develop more cordial relations with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership in Arbil. Given that Biden has been highly supportive of Kurdish claims in the past, Turkey's bargaining power vis-à-vis the Iraqi Kurdish leadership might decrease in the new era with an ardent Kurdish-sympathizer sitting in the White House as vice-president.

That Obama campaigned for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq within sixteen months following the start of his presidency has also worried Ankara. The concern is that an early American withdrawal might cause more insecurity and instability in Iraq. From Ankara's perspective a realistic assessment of the situation on the ground rather than an idealistic belief in troop withdrawal should help define the American approach towards the issue. The factual developments in Iraq suggest that Iraqis are still far from meeting their own security needs and resolving their internal disagreements. Ankara has been particularly concerned with the possibility that an independent Kurdistan might come into existence if Iraqi Kurdish leadership were no longer to feel committed to Iraq's territorial integrity in the post-occupation era.

One can argue that Clinton's personality might help increase the possibility that American advocacy of Turkey's EU membership will be positively received by EU capitals.

3. See Nuh Yilmaz, "Joe Biden: A Realist Cold War Liberal," *SETA Policy Brief*, No. 21, September 2008. http://www.setav.org/document/Policy_Brief_No_21_Nuh_Yilmaz.pdf?phpMyAdmin=e008732753bf014f26cf3b79aa21f1f1
4. Joseph R. Biden and Leslie H. Gelb, "Unity through Autonomy in Iraq," *New York Times*, May 1, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/01/opinion/01biden.html>

It is certain that Clinton, like the President himself, would like to help improve the United States' tarnished image and increase its soft power across the globe.

Therefore, Ankara holds, the American withdrawal from Iraq should be tied to the continuation of Kurdish support for Iraq's territorial integrity and sovereignty.⁵

In Ankara's view, Iraq might descend into further chaos and instability should different Iraqi groups fail to sort out their internal disagreements on such issues as the final status of Kirkuk, the distribution of Iraq's natural resources, the shape of the administrative system, and the boundaries of the Kurdish Regional Government by the time the American withdrawal from Iraq is complete. A noteworthy development in this regard is the gathering of Turkish, American and Iraqi representatives in Baghdad after the signing of the Status of Forces Agreement between the United States and Iraq in November 2008 to agree on the terms of Turkey's action in northern Iraq in the post-American era. According to the SOFA, Turkish authorities would need to ask the approval of the Iraqi authorities in order to organize military operations in northern Iraq from the first of January 2009 onwards. What concerns Ankara in this context is that strategic and intelligence-oriented cooperation with the Americans might not survive into the new era if Baghdad and Erbil were to place additional constraints on the Turkish capital.

Besides Iraq, Turkish-American relations in the new era will also be affected by the determination of the Obama administration to talk to Iran and push for economic sanctions on Tehran should the latter not cease its uranium enrichment activities and its support of anti-American terrorist groups. Apparently, Turkish decision makers feel content that the United States now sees talks with Iran as necessary for regional peace. Turkey has long argued for that. However, this also creates pressures on Turkey. The question is, how should Turkey respond to a particular US demand that Turkey support the economic embargo put on Iran if all diplomatic efforts fail to produce a desired outcome. It is going to be difficult for Turkey to keep a position of equidistant neutrality between Washington and Tehran if the United States succeeds in gaining international support to isolate Iran. An additional factor that will make it difficult for Turkey to preserve its neutral position is that Turkey was recently elected to the United Nations Security Council as a non-permanent member, effective January 1, 2009. If the decision to put an embargo on Iran should come to the agenda of the UNSC, Turkey would have to take sides.

Enter Clinton as the New Secretary of State

The early reactions in Turkey given to the appointment of Obama's security council reflected euphoria. The major cause of this optimism has been that Clinton, Gates and Jones are quite knowledgeable of Turkey and their realist worldviews could help balance the idealist inclinations of the Obama-Biden duo in the White House. The expectation has been that these personalities would bring a realpolitick window to Obama's more liberal approach toward Turkey and inform the President of Turkey's geopolitical value for the materialization of key American security interests in the Greater Middle Eastern region. General Jones served as the Supreme Commander of the American Forces in Europe and built close relations with Turkish generals. He was highly instrumental in rebuilding trust between the two armies in the aftermath of the infamous Sulemania crisis in July 2003. Gates was appointed as the Secretary of Defense by President Bush to oversee the so-called "Surge" strategy and to repair the damage that Donald Rumsfeld's years in the Pentagon had inflicted on the image of the United States. Gates was also one of the key figures involved in engineering the Turkish-American agreement in November 2007 to combat PKK terrorism.

It has long been believed in Turkey that Ankara's relations with Washington would progress more smoothly if the residents of the White House on the one hand and key foreign and security policymakers on the other came from the Republican camp. Republicans are assumed to be more predisposed than democrats to view Turkey through realist-security lenses. However, the last eight years have simply proven this assumption wrong, as Turkish-American relations went through one of their most problematic eras ever during the reign of Bush's republican administration. This indicates that a mere Republican presidency does not always lead to harmonious and cooperative bilateral relations. Therefore, with the new NSC, there is optimism that the good old days of the 1990s might come back. After all, it was during the reign of Democratic President Bill Clinton that Turkish-American relations were elevated to the level of "strategic partnership."

Against this background, the critical task ahead is how to assess the possible "Clinton impact" on Turkish-American relations. The first observation to make in this context is that Hillary Clinton is the wife of the former Democrat President Bill Clinton under whom Turkish-American relations experienced one of their golden ages. During the Clinton years, for the first time in the aftermath of the Cold War era, many defined Turkey-US

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relations as a strategic partnership based on mutual trust and common interests. Hillary Clinton's attitudes toward Turkey will likely be informed by the positive legacy of her husband's presidency.

Second, during the election period, such Democrats as Richard Holbrooke advised Clinton on foreign policy. In the past, Holbrooke adopted sympathetic views toward Turkey's EU accession process and the Cyprus dispute. Even though Clinton lost the race to Obama to be nominated as the candidate of the Democratic Party during the presidential elections, she will likely bring former aides to influential positions as part of her agreement with the new President.

Third, Clinton has proven herself as a liberal internationalist politician. She values international organizations and key NATO allies in the materialization of US foreign policies. Clinton has made it very clear that the United States has committed a big mistake in alienating its European allies in recent years. She will likely try to improve relations with European allies and reassert America's traditional commitment to multilateral global arrangements.⁶

Clinton supports Obama's vision that relations between the two shores of the Atlantic should be improved as soon as possible, particularly in the face of the ongoing global economic crisis and a resurgent Russia. And Turkey would certainly benefit from the amelioration of transatlantic relations. In the past, Turkey's relations with the West operated smoothly whenever transatlantic partners shared a common global security vision. Besides, American calls for Turkey's EU membership were positively received whenever Brussels and Washington viewed each other as friends and partners. Such a situation has gone missing over the last eight years, as President Bush adopted a unilateral foreign policy approach and sidestepped European allies on many issues. Therefore, one can argue that Clinton's personality might help increase the possibility that American advocacy of Turkey's EU membership will be positively received by EU capitals.

Fourth, Clinton, like Obama, supports the revitalization of the peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians and sees the resolution of this dispute as fundamental to

the emergence of regional stability. In this context, they differ from Bush who has long argued that peace in the Middle East should not be tied to the end result of the Israeli-Palestinian problem. What is noteworthy here is that the more equidistant and balanced an attitude the new US administration adopts towards the Israelis and the Palestinians, the more positively Turkey's peace-brokering role in this conflict will be received by the parties involved. In the recent past, the extremely pro-Israel approach of the Bush presidency has not only militated against the credibility of US policies on this dispute but also limited Turkey's capacity to play a facilitator role between the Israelis and Palestinians. Since Washington adopted an extremely pro-Israel attitude under Bush and strongly criticized Turkey's efforts to help introduce Hamas into the peace negotiations as a legitimate actor, the Israeli government itself did not trust Turkey's intentions in this context. This situation will likely change in the new era, for both Obama and Clinton are not as pro-Israeli as Bush and his neo-conservative supporters. Jerusalem will likely view Turkey's peace-brokering role positively as it becomes increasingly difficult for Israel to justify its resort to mounting violence. Turkey's involvement in the peace negotiations as a credible third party might help Israel get rid of the specter of complete isolation in the region.

Turkey's latest opening to Armenia in late 2008, as epitomized by the visit of the Turkish President Abdullah Gül to Armenia, has also been positively received by Clinton.

Fifth, both Obama and Clinton argue for intensive diplomacy in the Middle East. During the pre-election period they strongly criticized President Bush's hawkish and unilateral approach towards Iran and Syria. In this sense, one can expect that Turkey's multilateral and multidimensional foreign policy in the region will be received positively by the new US leadership. It is certain that Clinton, like the President himself, would like to help improve the United States' tarnished image and increase its soft power across the globe. Cooperation with Turkey, a critical ally in a critical geography with a predominantly Muslim society, might help in this regard. During the Bush presidency, Turkey's efforts to play an active regional role in the Middle East did not always receive acclamation. Particularly worrisome for Washington was Turkey's invitation of Khaled Meshal to Ankara following the electoral victory of Hamas in the Palestinian territories in 2006 and Ankara's efforts to improve relations with Damascus at a time when Washington was trying to isolate the Bashar Assad regime. Yet despite the Bush administration's hand wringing, one can speculate that Clinton might accept Turkey's suggestion that Ankara play a facilitator role in direct diplomatic negotiations between Washington and Tehran.

It seems that the appointment of Clinton as the new US Secretary of State will produce more positive than negative outcomes on Turkish-American relations during Obama presidency.

Sixth, Clinton supports an orderly, cautious and responsible withdrawal from Iraq. This seems in line with Turkey's approach.⁷ She shares Turkey's insistence that withdrawal should be tied to security improvements on the ground and the success of the Iraqis in resolving their internal disagreements. Her idea that a regional stabilization group should be established with a view to helping develop strategies for a viable Iraq that does not hurt its neighbors will certainly constitute a mechanism through which one can expect more Turkish-American cooperation in the years to come. However, her pre-election idea that some US forces should be deployed in northern Iraq to protect the gains of the Iraqi Kurds might fuel Turkey's worries.⁸ What might help assuage Turkey's concerns in this context is a firm US position that the PKK's presence in the region must be dealt with, and borders with Turkey must be respected.

Seventh, Clinton supports the view that the real front in the global war on terror is Afghanistan and that the number of US and NATO troops there needs to be increased. This might create both an opportunity for cooperation with Turkey and a source of tension. The call for additional troops might encourage Washington to support Turkey's major foreign policy goals, two of which are Turkey's EU membership process and the struggle against the PKK. On the other hand, Turkey might find it difficult to increase the number of its troops there so long as such an action carries the risk of impairing Turkey's historical ties to Afghanistan. The fact that Obama strongly supports the air-bombing of Pakistan on the pretext of the Pakistani role in the escalation of Taliban attacks might further reduce the possibility of Turkish acceptance of US calls for troop increase.

Eighth, Clinton argues for a critical engagement with Russia, rather than Moscow's isolation from the international community due to Russia's growing assertiveness in the Caucasus. She does not share President Bush's unilateral and aggressive policies towards Moscow and considers the US plans to install missile defense facilities in Eastern European countries and to enlarge NATO to include Ukraine and Georgia as risky and untimely.⁹ One can even claim that this particular position adopted by both Obama and Clinton on Russia might have played a role in the US acceptance of

7. "Erdoğan: Irak'tan Çekilme Tarihi Erken Oldu," *Zaman*, 14 November 2008. <http://www.zaman.com.tr/haber.do?haberno=760363>

8. Op.cit. Clinton, 2007.

9. "Hillary Clinton's Foreign Policy: Where She stands on the issues." <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/northamerica/usa/barackobama/3498790/Hillary-Clintons-foreign-policy-Where-she-stands-on-the-issues.html>

the latest NATO decision in December 2008 to postpone the membership process of Ukraine and Georgia. This suggests that Turkey's fear of a new Cold War between the West and Russia might not come true. The more the specter of Cold War rears its head, the more tension Turkey will experience in its relations with Moscow and the West.

Clinton supports the diversification of oil and gas resources on which the Western countries, mainly European Union members, rely. In this regard, she will likely support Turkey's role as an intermediary country linking the natural resources of the Caspian and Central Asia to western markets. Regarding the presence of NATO and the United States in the Black Sea region, Clinton has not yet adopted a clear policy line. Given that both Turkey and Russia, the two most influential littoral states, vehemently argue against the prospect of NATO controlling water trafficking in the Black Sea, and given that Clinton supports the engagement of Russia rather than its exclusion from the international system, one can only speculate that she may not pursue the "NATO-ization" of the Black Sea to the extent that President Bush did.

Ninth, it seems likely that the old American policies prioritizing the settlement of the Cyprus dispute within the framework of a bi-zonal/bi-communal federation will continue in the new era. That Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) supported the Annan Plan in 2004 has relieved Turkey of the international stigmatization concerning the non-settlement of the dispute. The two communities on the island have now been talking to each other under the auspices of the United Nations. It does not seem probable that the new American administration with Clinton acting as the Secretary of State will come up with a pro-Greek attitude and put pressure on Turkey in this context. In Clinton's view, Turkey's place is inside the European Union and this should not be obstructed by the Cyprus dispute. However, the time to test the American position on the Cyprus dispute and the continuation of Turkey's EU accession process will arise when the European Union reconsiders Turkey's policy on the extension of the Customs Union agreement to the Republic of Cyprus in full by the end of 2009.

The most worrisome expectation regarding the Clinton impact on Turkish-American relations arises in the context of the Armenian genocide claims. Senator Clinton has in the past supported bills in the Senate to the effect that the United States should recognize what happened to Armenians during the First World War as genocide.

Recognition of the so-called Armenian genocide in the US Senate will be highly likely if Clinton does not revise her previous stance on this issue and consider Turkey's cooperation on key policy areas more valuable than pandering to Armenian lobbies in the US. However, Turkey's latest opening to Armenia in late 2008, as epitomized by the visit of the Turkish President Abdullah Gül to Armenia, has also been positively received by Clinton. Therefore, one can expect that Clinton will likely take into account the improving relations between Turkey and Armenia in shaping her policy when the Armenian genocide bill comes to the agenda of the Senate in the months ahead.

Concluding Remarks

On balance, it seems that the appointment of Clinton as the new US Secretary of State will produce more positive than negative outcomes on Turkish-American relations during Obama presidency. Clinton not only adopts a liberal-internationalist world view but also supports the resolution of perennial security problems in the Middle East through more diplomacy. Her support for Turkey's EU membership process on the one hand and her assessment of developments in the Middle East from a realist/pragmatic perspective on the other might offer windows of cooperation in bilateral relations.

It seems that in the new era bilateral relations will increasingly depend on US policies on Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. On the one hand, it is positive that Clinton supports a timely and responsible withdrawal from Iraq, Iran's engagement through diplomacy, and the replacement of Iraq by Afghanistan as the most important front in the global war on terror. On the other hand, Turkey will likely face risks if Washington seeks Ankara's inclusion in the economic embargo on Tehran, Ankara's full support for the increasing war efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Ankara's acquiescence in closer engagement with Iraqi Kurds before the presence of PKK terrorists in northern Iraq is eliminated.

Despite all the possible roots of tension, this brief expects that Clinton will adopt a pragmatic approach to Turkey and do whatever she can to salvage bilateral relations from descending into further chaos and deterioration. After all, the composition of the new National Security Council suggests that in the near future Washington will be mainly preoccupied with damage control activities abroad while dealing with more

pressing economic issues at home. Losing Turkey under such circumstances would be a blow to Washington as Turkey's cooperation appears to be vital in the materialization of key American foreign policy interests.

This brief recommends that both Washington and Ankara stop viewing each other as indispensable allies and instead base their relations on dynamic, common interests rather than reified common values and norms. Washington should interpret Turkey's growing regional profile in the Greater Middle East as being in its interests, rather than as a sign of Turkey's estrangement from the West or an aspiration to resurrect the Ottoman Empire. For its part, Ankara should try to find solutions to its perennial security problems through democracy and pluralism and respond to US policies on the Armenian issue and Turkey's democratization process in a more rational, rather than psychological or emotional manner.

There is a new environment that Washington and Ankara may base their relations on dynamic, common interests rather than reified common values and norms. Washington should interpret Turkey's growing regional profile in the Greater Middle East as being in its interests, rather than as a sign of Turkey's estrangement from the West or an aspiration to resurrect the Ottoman Empire. Ankara should try to find solutions to its perennial security problems through democracy and pluralism and respond to US policies on the Armenian issue and Turkey's democratization process in a more rational, rather than psychological or emotional manner. The appointment of Clinton as the new US Secretary of State will produce more positive than negative outcomes on Turkish-American relations during Obama presidency.

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