
American – Turkish Cooperation

By

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[The following is an excerpt of remarks provided by the Secretary of State to the American-Turkish Council Luncheon, Washington, DC, April 15, 2008.]

Turkey is a vital and strategic partner of the United States, and so it's fitting that this year's conference theme is: "Regional Allies and Global Partners." I did indeed visit Turkey, first as Secretary of State, in my very first trip in 2005 because the centrality of this relationship is very clear to me and has been for a number of years. But a year later, my then counterpart, Foreign Minister Gul, now President Gul, and I decided to create a strategic vision statement for U.S.-Turkish relations because we wanted to show that the relationship between Turkey and the United States was evolving and was moving toward the challenges of the 21st century—that it, of course, was a relationship that had important elements as military allies and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] allies. But it was much more than that. It was a relationship of growing economic ties. It was a relationship of growing diplomatic responsibility for the challenges in the world. And perhaps, most importantly, it was a growing relationship between our peoples. I am always very much mindful that, while the relationship between governments is important, the relationship between peoples is what really brings a firm foundation to a relationship between nations.

Now, as NATO allies over many decades, our cooperation today is closer and more necessary than ever—in fighting terrorism, in promoting freedom and democracy, and in ensuring that all people within the region can live safely and securely without fear. Our commitment to these goals also leads us beyond the region, to cooperate on a global basis for the advancement of peace and prosperity and freedom. The United States views our great democratic ally, Turkey, as an active shaper of positive global trends; and it is a mission that is uniting us more and more in the 21st century.

It was Turkey's founder, Kemal Ataturk, who famously described the new Republic's vision as, "Peace at home, peace in the world." He recognized back then the importance of promoting peace as a key policy objective of the Turkish Republic—just as our own founder Thomas Jefferson did for the United States when he said, "Peace and friendship with all mankind is our wisest policy." Our mutual cooperation is helping to ensure a region and a world that are freer, more at peace, and more secure.

Turkey and the United States in pursuing that vision share a commitment to a united Iraq that is secure, stable, prosperous, at peace with its neighbors, and free from all forms of terrorism. Let me be very clear: the United States recognizes the PKK [Partiya Karker Kurdistan (Kurdistan Worker's Party)] as a common enemy of Turkey, Iraq, and the United States. Our nations, together with our European partners, are pursuing a comprehensive strategy to eliminate the PKK's safe haven in Northern Iraq and to cut off its criminal and financial networks in Europe. At the same time, we are working for positive change in Iraq to ensure the stability of Iraq through the neighbor's process. Turkey hosted the last expanded Iraq neighbors ministerial in November in Istanbul. And we will meet later this month in Kuwait to address the challenges that we face and the progress that has been made in Iraq.

Turkey and the United States are also working side-by-side in Afghanistan. I was just with my Turkish colleagues—including President Gul and Foreign Minister Babacan in Bucharest this week—last week with our NATO allies to reaffirm our long-term commitment to Afghanistan's success. Turkey has been integral to NATO's success in supporting the Karzai government, in limiting the Taliban's influence, and in providing humanitarian and reconstruction assistance for the Afghan people. Together we recognize that sustainable democratic development in Afghanistan is the key to sustainable peace.

Turkey and the United States will continue to work together to defend and promote freedom and opportunity for the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo. As President Bush has said, “Freedom can be resisted, and freedom can be delayed. But freedom cannot be denied.” Turkey’s own long legacy of advancing modern and democratic reforms as a Muslim majority society can inspire those throughout the broader Middle East and beyond who seek to meet their own national challenges democratically.

Governments that are democratic and free must also strive to ensure that their citizens are prosperous. Turkey and the United States have been promoting economic freedom, open markets, and increased trade, not only with each other but also with our partners around the world. Our dialog on these issues is very deep. It’s frequent, and it’s wide-ranging. In fact, this Thursday, as we hold our annual Economic Partnership Commission, this will be in full view. This meeting addresses the central economic issues that tie Turkey and the United States ever closer together in an ever more mature economic relationship—including investment; trade; innovation; [and] cooperation in building prosperity in states that neighbor, states like Pakistan and Afghanistan. And of course, there is a significant portion of our work that is devoted to reliable energy.

We fully understand that the growth of both our economies increasingly depends on new, more efficient and more environmentally friendly sources of energy. Currently, Turkey occupies a strategic location in the region’s energy supply chain. Eight percent of the world’s oil transits Turkey each day, and its position becomes increasingly more important with the construction of each new pipeline on Turkish soil. Turkey and the United States are now building on the success of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline; and we are developing a new generation of natural gas infrastructure that will help Europe secure its energy supplies at prices set by markets, not by monopolists. The Turkey-Greece-Italy and Nabucco pipelines are emerging as a new Southern Corridor connecting gas supplies in Azerbaijan and the Caspian Basin, as well as Iraq, with Turkey and other European markets.

The United States and Turkey will from time to time disagree on how best to pursue our goals on all the issues I have mentioned today. It happens among friends. But we will also—always do so, remaining firmly united by our shared democratic values, like tolerance and respect for human dignity and human rights. Throughout history, both Turkey and the United States have struggled to be true to these values. And while we have each made many advances, many struggles lie ahead.

The United States was founded on great principles, but our founding documents did not recognize equal rights for my ancestors or for women. In fact, when our Founding Fathers said “We the People,” they didn’t actually mean me. It took the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, to overcome the compromise in our Constitution that made the founding of the United States of America possible, but that made my ancestors three-fifths of a man and enslaved them for another hundred years. Many courageous individuals fought for many years to improve American democracy and to ensure that it is truly representative of all American citizens, and that process continues even today. Thus, when we see the process of building and perfecting democracy in a friend like Turkey, we know that the road is not easy; it is, indeed, hard.

In the 84 years since the founding of the Turkish Republic, Turkish citizens have continually built on Ataturk’s commitment to democracy and secularism. As with all countries, it is a work in progress. We have seen Turkey strive to improve and transform its democracy and to modernize its economy in its bid to join the European Union [EU]. We continue strongly to support Turkey’s EU candidacy. It will be good for Turkey, and it will be good for Europe. Ankara’s openness to renewed efforts on the divided island of Cyprus to reach an agreement on bi-zonal, bi-communal federation is also a key part of the process of Europe’s construction.

In 2007, we witnessed the maturity and vibrancy of Turkey’s democracy as it weathered and came out stronger. It was a challenging political year that included a delay in the Presidential election and then the carrying out of both parliamentary and Presidential elections. You may know that the struggles continue.

But Turkish—the Turkish people, the Turkish voters, will resolve the difficulties before them within their secular democratic context and their secular democratic principles. All that can be asked of a democratic society is to stay true to those principles as it goes through difficult times.

Indeed, as Winston Churchill once said, “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Still, both we and Turkey know that democracy is the best system we have to ensure that human rights and fundamental freedoms are ensured for all. On that note, we commend Prime Minister Erdogan for stating recently that parliament will amend Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, which criminalizes insulting “Turkishness.” We encourage this. Expressing one’s beliefs is not an insult to the state; it is one of the highest forms of citizenship.

Democracy is also the best way to protect peoples’ right to practice religion freely. We appreciate the support that Turkey has given to the people across the broader Middle East and North Africa —impatient patriots in those places who are working to strengthen civil society and build democratic institutions as the guarantee for their freedom of conscience. These freedoms are essential to defeating extremism and terror. We have worked together too in the Middle East, to try and promote a process through the Annapolis process that would give the Palestinian people also an alternative to extremism and terror in their own state. And I want to thank the Turkish Government for its presence at Annapolis and its continuing support to that process.

Both of our nations want to be the best champions of these values that we can within the region; and, therefore, we must continue to strengthen these values at home in our own democracies. We continue to encourage Turkey to recognize and protect civil rights of all religious and ethnic groups, such as by reopening the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s Halki Seminary as a vocational school.

The United States and Turkey will continue to support freedom, democracy, and prosperity in the broader Middle East and well beyond because we know from hard experience that it is the best way for diverse peoples to live together and to share power and to resolve their differences in peace without oppression of anyone or exclusion or worse. These values are the foundation of everything we do together. And they are why I believe Lord Palmerston got it wrong when he said that “nations have no permanent allies.” The United States does have permanent allies, and those are nations with which we share values. And we have, therefore, a permanent friend and ally in Turkey.