

INSS Insight No. 1465, May 6, 2021

From Crisis to Crisis: Turkey-US Relations at a Low Point

Gallia Lindenstrauss and Eldad Shavit

Relations between Turkey and the United States, which have been at crisis level for some time, sustained a further shock with the explicit use by US President Joe Biden of the term “Armenian genocide” on April 24, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. Already during the administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump the image of Turkey in Washington changed from a valued ally to a state with barely any supporters in the US capital, and opposition to the policy of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is bi-partisan. Decisions that are clearly against Turkey’s interests, including its official removal from the F-35 project and recognition of the Armenian genocide, are received with little or no criticism in Washington. Notwithstanding the singular nature of Turkey-US relations, the factors underlying the erosion of the United States view of Turkey as a strategic ally demand attention in other countries as well, including Israel.

Relations between Turkey and the United States, which have been in deep crisis for some time, sustained a further shock when US President Joe Biden explicitly used the term “Armenian genocide” on April 24, 2021, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. As such, Biden fulfilled his election promise and became the first US President to officially recognize the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire against the Armenian people during the First World War. After delaying the first direct call to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during the initial three months of his term, President Biden personally informed Erdogan of the move in a phone conversation on the eve of the announcement, but also [stressed](#) his interest in maintaining “a constructive bilateral relationship.” The heads of state decided to meet in June on the sidelines of a meeting of NATO leaders. The move by the US President came after many years in which the Armenian diaspora in the United States tried to promote the matter; the Turkish diplomatic failure to prevent the announcement is particularly striking in view of the enormous resources Turkey has invested in denying the Armenian genocide over the years.

Although in a speech focusing on the Holocaust President Ronald Reagan mentioned the Armenian genocide, it was during the presidency of Barack Obama (who also promised to recognize the genocide) that expectations by the Armenians of official recognition of the genocide peaked. However, various considerations, including Obama’s intention to

withdraw from Iraq, the dialogue between Turkey and Armenia at that time, and the international struggle against the Islamic State translated into the absence of recognition – despite the fact that the centenary of the genocide in 2015 occurred during Obama’s presidency. In hindsight, former senior members of the Obama administration said this was a mistake, and he should have recognized the genocide in his first year in office.

The US avoidance of recognizing the genocide until now did not slow down the decline in Turkish-American relations, which began during Obama’s second term of office and continued during the Trump presidency (in spite of the chemistry between the leaders). The crisis focused around a number of central issues: American support for the Kurds in Syria; Ankara’s decision to purchase the S-400 air defense system from Russia, leading to Turkey’s removal from the F-35 project; and the non-extradition of the preacher Fethullah Gulen, who the Turks believe was behind the failed coup attempt in 2016. The direct ties formed between Trump and Erdogan enabled Ankara to achieve suspension of the imposition of significant sanctions on Turkey and start a number of military operations against the Kurds in northern Syria. Still, this did not stop Trump from tweeting against Turkey when the Evangelical lobby pressured for the release of the American pastor Andrew Brunson, who was imprisoned in Turkey, which in turn led to the collapse of the Turkish lira – with effects on the Turkish economy that are still being felt – until Brunson was released. Relations between Turkey and the United States are expected to suffer another blow soon with the expected start of the trial in the US of the Turkish bank Halkbank, which is accused of breaching the sanctions imposed on Iran before the nuclear agreement was signed in 2015. If a significant fine is imposed on the bank, this would have considerable consequences for the Turkish banking system.

Contrary to the pattern of relations between the countries during the Trump administration, which were largely conducted through telephone calls between the presidents – a system that suited Erdogan’s centralized style of decision making – the Biden administration’s ties with Turkey will be dictated by an orderly strategy to be formulated by all elements in the administration and implemented in a coordinated fashion, based on defined American interests. Ankara is also concerned that Biden is considered the most pro-Kurdish president so far, and before entering office he talked about the need to support the Turkish opposition. Moreover, the administration is expected to stress issues of human rights in Turkey. In this context, there is growing concern in Ankara that he will pressure Turkey to release important political prisoners, such as the leaders of the pro-Kurdish party. It is likely that the administration will also be attentive to Greek complaints about Turkey’s assertive conduct in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In other contexts, President Biden has already shown that he intends to keep the promises he made before the elections. However, it is likely that Turkey's current weakness, both in the international arena and in the economic realm, facilitated the step of recognizing the Armenian genocide – where other Presidents have hesitated due to the possible consequences for US-Turkey relations. Apart from strong rhetoric, it appears that Ankara currently has few tools to use against Washington in a way that will not also harm itself. Moreover, whereas in the past the impression was that Washington needed Ankara in order to realize American interests, the reality now in most cases is exactly the opposite. Indeed, the response from Ankara to Biden's declaration was restrained, and in Erdogan's speech he even [mentioned](#) that he was expecting to open the door to a new era in relations with the United States, a statement that leaves little doubt about the limited options he faces.

During the Obama and Trump administrations, Turkey went from a situation where it was perceived in Washington as a valued ally to a country that has barely any supporters in the American capital, with bi-partisan opposition to Erdogan's policies. Decisions that are clearly contrary to Turkey's interests, such as its official removal from the F-35 project and recognition of the Armenian genocide, are taken in Washington almost without criticism, and there are those who think that not only are these decisions correct, but that they should have been taken much sooner.

On the other hand, in the Iranian context, Turkey supported the nuclear agreement, opposed Trump's policy on this matter, and welcomes the renewal of talks with Tehran. Biden also seeks to strengthen multilateral frameworks, and above all NATO, where Turkey has a respectable place at the table in spite of the tension around its purchase of Russian air defense systems. Biden's first meeting as President with Erdogan is therefore expected to be on the sidelines of the NATO meeting to be held in Brussels in June. The growing crisis in Ukraine also demonstrates that in the Black Sea region, American and Turkish interests coincide more than they deviate.

Biden's policy toward Turkey, and before that his decision to "recalibrate" relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia, signal how his administration operates. While Trump's presidency was based on intimate personal relations with leaders of the Middle East and elsewhere, the Biden administration intends to adopt a businesslike approach to promote American interests, while not ignoring the values it deems important. It appears that the widening gap between Turkey and the US, apart from its concrete causes, derives from a combination of factors that also affect the administration's policies toward other countries, above all the retreat from liberal values and the adoption of a string of moves that are perceived as clearly opposed to American interests. In addition, even if the underlying bilateral conditions are different, analysis of

the reasons for the erosion in the US view of Turkey as a strategic ally requires attention in other countries, including Israel. Other United States allies should take into consideration that political and demographic processes in the US, and how various countries behave with respect to issues that are important to Americans, could eventually affect the basic approach of American administrations to their US allies.