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## A golden era for US-Turkey relations?

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guardian.co.uk, - 4/4/2009

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Turkey's relationship with Iran, Syria and Hamas is crucial to the Obama camp's efforts to secure peace in the Middle East

After back-to-back visits to Turkey by US Middle East envoy George Mitchell and secretary of state Hillary Clinton, Ahmet Davutoglu, a top adviser to Turkey's prime minister, predicted that Turkish-American relations were about to enter a golden era. This prediction was based on converging developments in Turkey and America's approach to the Middle East in particular and foreign policy in general. President Obama's visit to Turkey on the 6 April signals that this new golden era has indeed begun.

Several key developments in Turkish foreign policy occurred in the first few months of 2009. The accusatory tone adopted by Turkey towards Israel, condemning the latter's assault on Gaza, was reaffirmed in the most recent World Economic Forum summit in Davos when its prime minister, Recep Tayipp Erdogan, stormed out of a panel discussion, lambasting the Israeli president, Shimon Peres, for his government's actions. Meanwhile, Turkey constructed close ties with the Arab world and Iran ` closer than at any previous moment in the history of the republic. Middle Eastern countries hosted more Turkish politicians in the last three months than in the last decade. Erdogan is now viewed favourably as a leader by the peoples of the Arab world. Turkey emerged in the Middle East as the sort of power with which international and regional actors were not familiar.

It can be inferred from Clinton's remarks during her delegation's stay in Turkey that the US regards Turkey as an effective negotiator in the region. Turkey's relationship with Iran, Syria and Hamas is critical to the enactment of foreign policy through diplomacy approach of the Obama administration, as Turkey could act as a conduit through which America would communicate with these countries and actors. Despite outspoken critics in Washington, the Obama camp regards Turkey's relationship of open dialogue with Iran, Syria and Hamas as positive.

Several issues are expected to mark the agenda during the Obama administration's visit: the US military's exit from Iraq; the establishment of security in Afghanistan; normalisation of relations with Iran and Iran's nuclear enrichment capacity; the Caucasus and Turkish-Armenian relations; east-west energy routes and energy security; Turkey's bid for EU membership; and the settlement of the Cyprus problem. Regardless of whether military bases in Turkey are employed, America needs Turkey's full logistical support during the eventual US withdrawal from Iraq.

There are more similarities between Turkish and American foreign policy visions today than ever before. Previously, during the Clinton presidency, American policy emphasised human rights and democracy while

Turkish foreign policy was preoccupied with security. As the US mended its global image, Turkey was taken hostage to troubled relations with its neighbours, Iran and Syria. Later, under the Bush administration, American foreign policy priorities became tied to security, while Turkey's agenda was determined by its plea for full membership in the EU and the consequent political reform and democratisation process. America's global image was toppled during this period while Turkey improved its relationship with its neighbours and became an influential actor in their affairs.

Today, America's foreign policy vision converges with Turkey's on democracy, human rights, peace, and international legitimacy. The Obama administration needs regional allies to implement its foreign policy through multilateral diplomacy. A review of the Obama delegation's agenda for his visit to Turkey reveals that the president will present some proposals to address Turkey's foreign policy problems, such as Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkish-Armenian relations. US support for Turkey's democratisation and EU membership will anchor Turkey on this path. This perception will contribute to the democratisation of the polity in Turkey. Turkey's civilian elite is currently spending a great deal of energy to put an end to the cold war-style illegal apparatus deep rooted within the state (known popularly as Ergenekon).

The Obama administration's efforts at engagement will not be in vain. The current Turkish administration promotes a domestic and foreign policy orientation that accommodates co-operation, demonstrated by Turkey's recent peace brokering in the region. It is only a matter of time before we witness the positive effects that a possible Turkish-American relationship will have on the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world.

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