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"The United States and Turkey: A View from the Obama Administration"

The Brookings Institution
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The Brookings Institution, in collaboration with Sabanci University, held the sixth annual Sakip Sabanci Lecture with **Philip H. Gordon**, Assistant Secretary of European and Eurasian Affairs, to discuss the Obama administration's perspective on Turkey, its relationship with the United States and the European Union, and its role across the Middle East and throughout the world.

After brief welcoming remarks from **Strobe Talbott**, president of Brookings Institution, Gordon took to the podium, pointing out "Turkey's increasing importance in international affairs" and emphasizing that an "engaged, cooperative, active relationship" is in the interest of both countries. **"Turkey and the United States have been partners for decades and that partnership is as important today as it has ever been," he said.** To highlight Turkey's budding clout, he cited its geographic position amid such a diverse set of countries and in such a sensitive part of the world, the importance of its unique secular and Muslim character, its vast economic growth, its influence on stability in the Middle East and its role in providing security and development of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Referencing Turkey's active foreign policy of "zero problems" with its neighbors, Gordon joked that "whenever and wherever I travel, one of the sentences I hear most often is '[Foreign Minister] **Ahmet Davutoglu** was just here.'"

Despite concerns that Turkey is "turning away from the West," Gordon reassured that "we [the Obama administration] don't see it that way." He explained that the U.S. sees Turkey as part of a strong Euro-Atlantic alliance and one that maintains strong relations with both East and West. He commented that "on nearly every issue critical to Turkey's future, the U.S. plays an important role as a trusted friend and ally," and vice versa. For example, both countries are working in Afghanistan to sustain its economy, provide assistance to its people and build infrastructure in its capital. He also commended as a "positive contribution" Turkey's efforts to improve its relations with Iraqi Kurds and its cooperation on fighting the PKK ("Kurdistan Workers' Party") and Al Qaeda.

Gordon emphasized the U.S.'s "strong support" for Turkey's accession into the European Union, explaining that "it will be good for the EU and good for Turkey." He also stressed that domestic promotion of religious rights and freedoms will both move its EU prospects forward and make it into a more democratic and modern nation.

"We are supportive of the Turkish government's concept of pursuing a policy of "zero problems" with its neighbors," he said. "This is a lofty and admirable goal. Bringing it to fruition, as everyone recognizes, will require difficult compromises and brave leadership." He added that while it was a

“good concept” it should “not be pursued uncritically or at any price.” This includes “offering a different voice” when the international community coalesces to present a single unified message against Iranian nuclear intentions. Gordon was critical of a Turkish abstention on a resolution at the International Atomic Energy Agency demanding that Iran suspend construction of the nuclear facility near the city of Qom, describing the decision as “not be helpful.” Likewise, he said that **improved relations with Iran should not come at expense to its special ties with Israel.**

Gordon said that the **Obama administration opposes the congressional resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide by the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee** because of its negative impact on reconciliation talks and prospects for normalization between Turkey and Armenia. These historical issues are best addressed by the two countries themselves, he remarked.

On issues within Turkey, Gordon stated that decisions about the country’s political future should only be made within a democratic framework. **He applauded the country’s leadership for protecting the Kurdish population and encouraged the government to protect freedom of the press, the rule of law and open competition among political parties.** Doing he, he reiterated, “will demonstrate the strength and vitality of Turkey’s democracy.”

Following his prepared remarks, Gordon answered a number of questions from audience members in Washington DC and Sabanci University, who participated via a live video-feed. In response to a comment by Turkish President **Tayyip Erdogan** that Iran’s nuclear ambitions are ‘rumors,’ Gordon said “there are rumors and what most of the world sees as facts.” He highlighted the growing consensus that Iran is not living up to its responsibilities and added that **he was still “convinced that Turkey shares our goal of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.”**

In response to a question about the recent tension between the U.S. and Israel, he said that these events represent “what we mean when we say being frank, even with friends.” He continued that the Obama administration would like to see Turkey approach its differences with Israel and to preserve that relationship to maintain leverage.

On a question about the withdrawal of the Turkish ambassador from the U.S., Gordon that he “regrets” it and “would like to see him back.” **He said that the administration urged lawmakers not to push the Armenian Genocide resolution to the House floor, but added that Congress is an independent body that will do what they decide to do.** Either way, he reiterated that “it was best for the countries to deal with [these issues] themselves.”

Gordon was also asked about “similarities between the Turkish and American’ governments relations with their [respective] media.” **He acknowledged that press freedom in Turkey was “a hot topic”** and stated both countries “have vibrant, active, free-wheeling media.” **Anything designed to constrain the media would be viewed as a negative development,** he stressed. A healthy media free from government intrusion is critically important in Turkey, as it is in all democracies.

In one of the final questions, Gordon dealt with public concerns that Turkey was moving away from its secular tradition. Although he did not have these doubts, he said the question’s mere existence requires the government in power to answer them. “In a democracy, even majority rule requires the government to be sensitive to traditions and positions” of its many citizens. “Turkey has been and is being sensitive to that,” he said.