

U.S.-Turkey Relations: Model Partnership as an ‘Empty Signifier’

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ABSTRACT

This commentary attempts to make a conceptual evaluation of the phrase “model partnership” as a definition of US-Turkey relations. Against the background of much debate about the “viability” or “possibility” of “model partnership,” it argues that “model partnership” as an empty signifier does not represent either the ideal or the fully accomplished state of Turkish-American relations. The current problems in the bilateral relations derive from the gradual transformation in the nature of Turkish-American relations from a hierarchical relationship into a complementary one, i.e. from a “strategic partnership” to a “model partnership.” As we are going through a structural change, “policy recommendations” alone will not suffice to remedy the broader problem of necessary adjustments. The option for a “model partnership” is still on the table, however, it requires a serious, engaged, and conceptual discussion as the two sides adjust to and negotiate the new form of the relationship.

During his first bilateral intercontinental trip after his election, President Barack Obama visited Turkey in April 2010. During his visit he used the expression “model partnership” to define US-Turkey relations.

Ever since Obama’s visit, Turkish and American analysts of Turkish-American relations have been debating what “model partnership” really means. Both sides have emphasized the importance of Turkish-American relations and suggested that a redefinition of relations after the Bush presidency was necessary. However, it seems that there is no agreement on what “model partnership” is or will be. Some analysts and even politicians have argued that the Flotilla Crisis and Turkey’s “No” vote at the UN Security Council put an early end to “model partnership,” which is now only a bygone hope.

In this commentary, I aim to take issue with such arguments and make a conceptual

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contribution to the “model partnership” debate. I argue that “model partnership” has not ended; on the contrary, it has not even started. “Model partnership” is not a well-defined and all encompassing type of relationship. This concept is premised on the recognition that Turkish-American relations are very valuable and

that the old framework, which threatens the bilateral relationship itself, needs to change. In other words, it is not a “model” describing how Turkish-American relations are today. On the contrary, “model partnership” is the “will to redefine” bilateral relations. As such, I will treat it as an “empty signifier,” i.e. “a signifier without a signified.”¹

What Went Wrong?

U.S.-Turkey relations have experienced difficult times. This is nothing new to the relationship, as the two partners have had serious disagreements in the past even during the Cold War when the two sides worked closely under NATO. However, this time the difficulty behind recent tensions is qualitatively different than the previous disagreements.

The current problem derives from the gradual transformation in the nature of Turkish-American relations from a hierarchical relationship into a complementary one, i.e. from a “strategic partnership” to a “model partnership.” In other words, the cause of the ongoing tension that marked the year 2010 does not merely emanate from disagreements over policy problems. It is, in fact, the other way around: policy disagreements are the consequences of this transformation in the very core of the partnership.

Therefore, any attempt to resolve problems between the two countries, without serious consideration of this structural change, is doomed to fail. What needs to be done is not to offer a policy solution as a “quick fix,” but rather to recognize and address the question in a conceptual manner. A conceptual rethinking of relations does not mean to supply content for what seem to be otherwise empty concepts. In other words, it should not mean to find a “signified” to the “signifier.” A more radical conceptual thinking is needed to reconstruct the relations on a healthy basis. A possible step in this direction would be to ask, “What does ‘model partnership’ really mean?”

Many analysts have tried to answer this question. Some argue that there is no such thing as a “model partnership.” Some argue that it was a good way to start

the relations all over again but now it is a lost opportunity. Some simply start talking about “model partnership” as if it is a well-known fact over which there is an agreement. Some merely transfer the content of the “strategic partnership” concept to “model partnership”, and naturally conclude that it is a failed project. Some argue that it is a good project upon which we still place some hopes. And finally, some argue that it is the new framework of Turkish-American relations.

The common theme that brings together all of these responses is the desire to answer the question right away without conceptual reflection. None of them pause for a second to try and make sense of the basic reason why we are still discussing the “model partnership.” Let us assume any one of those answers actually reflects the truth about the issue; then, what does one need to do? If the model partnership has failed, why have there been so many discussions on the issue? If the model partnership is simply another name for “strategic partnership,” why then does it not satisfy the parties and force them to find another label for the bilateral relations between Turkey and the USA? If the model partnership can be saved through some policy solutions, why have there been so many problems especially at the policy level?

My answer to these questions and answers is rather simple. The option for a model partnership is still on the table; however, it requires a serious, engaged, and conceptual discussion as the two sides adjust to and negotiate the new form of the relationship. To put it in a different way, I argue that since the conceptual construction and re-negotiation of the partnership as a “model partnership” is still the main issue in defining Turkish-American relations, it is neither a failed nor a complete project.

We can identify the “model partnership” debate as the symptom of the lack of a genuine conceptual engagement and discussion of the fundamental changes taking place in Turkish-American relations. In short, even though the questions cited above might seem justifiable, none of the answers are satisfactory, or justifiable for that matter, because the question does not require an answer in the first place. The question deserves attention, discussion, engagement, and thoughtful analysis rather than a simple answer. If that discussion can be undertaken, I believe that the two sides can build a healthy and long-term relationship. It remains a serious challenge that these somewhat misplaced questions and responses foreclose the discursive area for a quality discussion that needs to take place.

Quality of the Debate on Turkish-American Relations

An engaged discussion, which aims to question the current state of the relations, requires a pause before answering what a “model partnership” signifies. The

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answers described above have not helped ease the tensions in the bilateral relations but kept them alive. One would expect tensions to be relieved when politicians express good will and offer “simple answers” so to speak. But these are not enough, as they do not address the fundamental issue.

The fact that simple explanations do not suffice becomes even more obvious when we consider that the level of cooperation between the two countries is exceptional on many of their foreign policy issues. Why is it that we define the Turkish-American relationship with reference to problem areas only? How do we fail to remember that the U.S. and Turkey work very closely on two top-priority American foreign policy issues, namely the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?² The two countries share similar policies on many other issues such as Syria, Bosnia, Serbia, Caucasus, NATO etc. There are only two significant areas where the two parties diverge on a tactical level: the Iranian nuclear issue and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If we were to make a list of agreement and disagreement areas, we would find convergence rather than divergence in most of them. Then, what is the reason for the problems haunting the Turkey-US relationship? Why it is the case that “model partnership” neither solves these problems, nor allows them to disappear from the discussion? The “model partnership” is yet to be constructed through adjustment to a newly defined relationship between the two actors. We need to treat “model partnership” as an empty signifier of this new yet-to-be-defined relationship between the US and Turkey.

Since policy agreements or disagreements do not help solve the “structural re-adjustment problem,” then it would be better to leave the policy issues on the side for a more conceptual discussion that might open up a space for in-depth discussion. “Model partnership,” used by both parties, would allow us to diagnose the problem. Let’s look at how it has been used. Neither explained nor materialized by either party, “model partnership” does not present concrete solutions or offer a framework. It mainly functions as a word that came to be used by either party to show that the other partner “violated” the spirit of the “model partnership.” Both parties define “model partnership” differently while they agree on policy issues; but it does not produce any tangible results.

Since there is no genuine content to “model partnership,” I argue that “model partnership” is an “empty signifier.”³ Argentinean political theorist Ernesto Laclau

works on the concept in a political context. Laclau argues that an empty signifier is a “signifier without a signified.”⁴ Laclau questions the very idea of empty signifiers, and asks how it would be possible to have empty signifiers in a system of signification. His answer to this question is as impressive as his question: “there can be empty signifiers within the field of signification because any system of signification is structured around an empty place resulting from the impossibility of producing an object which, none the less, is required by the systematicity of the system.”⁵

This discussion of empty signifiers, therefore, would be a good start to diagnose the problem in Turkish-American relations, or problems in defining what “model partnership” really signifies. Following Laclau’s discussion, I see “model partnership” not as a policy issue or a new framework of relations. Rather, model partnership is an “empty signifier.” In other words, model partnership as an empty signifier, does not provide a positive content to the relations nor does it offer a “road map.” Because of this very reason, it lacks the ability to contribute to the discussion in a positive way.

“Model partnership” as an empty signifier, instead, carves out an empty space for Turkish-American relations where it is impossible, under the present conditions, to define or found the bilateral relationship. Therefore, “model partnership” does not show us how to resolve problems; in contrast, it shows that it is impossible to construct a new type of relationship given the current circumstances. “Model partnership,” because of this very reason, is not the name of the new phase of Turkish-American relations; it is an imaginary space where both parties agree that the old relations are not sustainable. Relations have to be reconstructed.

“Model partnership” will be the name of that empty space that will be filled with a positive content when the two parties agree on political terms to fill that gap. However, even though there is no positive content to the discussion, model partnership shows that both parties agree on the importance and continuation of the relationship. “Model partnership” indicates that there is an agreement between the parties on the necessity and urgency of a new framework that would allow them to rethink and rebuild a new model. Only through such rethinking would it be possible to prepare the ground for a sustainable and long-term relationship between the two sides. In other words, the concept of “model partnership” signifies “the need for a redefinition of relations,” nothing more.

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Since the model partnership represents this “hegemonic” race to give a positive content to the relations, all “political” actors attempt to fill the content of this empty signifier. “Model partnership” as an empty signifier indicates that strategic partnership is dead; a new type

of relationship is required, but nobody knows how new relations will look like. This might answer the question why we still discuss “model partnership” and why all parties attempt to give their meaning to the concept. Moreover, this also answers the question why the parties did not give up on the concept altogether even though there have been some serious tensions and disagreements.

Since the model partnership discussion is not a policy discussion, it is impossible to put an end to this discussion on a policy level. Policy recommendations would work only if there were an agreed framework on the nature of the relationship, which is currently missing in the Turkish-American relationship. The broader structural question I am concerned with here has to be answered at the conceptual level informed by a reconstructed political reality through a re-negotiation of political terms of the game. “Policy recommendations” as such will not be sufficient.

Conclusion

In the end, “model partnership” as an “empty signifier” shows U.S. an empty space in the “political discussion” in Turkish-American relations. The American side, which was the “privileged” party in the “strategic partnership,” is attempting to turn this discussion into a policy discussion in order to keep its privileged “subject” position in the relationship. The Turkish side, however, was the “submissive” party lacking the “subject” status enjoyed by the U.S. Now, the Turkish side is pushing for a more egalitarian relationship with the U.S. by trying to act as an agent on its own. Therefore, Turkey has been focusing on political issues rather than policy issues to be recognized as a “political subject.” Turkey is on course to have a real say in the destiny of affairs it is asked to have a stake in. In the past, it has simply assumed its role in scenarios designed by the U.S. in a bipolar world. However, just as that anomalous reality no longer exists, the very definition of the relationship is to be redefined through thoughtful conceptual consideration.

If a “model partnership” is to be truly realized between the U.S. and Turkey, the first and foremost condition will not be reaching an agreement on a “policy issue.” The most crucial qualitative difference will be whether the U.S. can revise

its general attitude towards and position vis-à-vis Turkey and accept its partner as a true “subject.” Once this recognition is realized, it would only then be possible to talk about the content of the “model partnership” and whether it can provide a genuine meaning and framework for the Turkish-American relationship. Until then, Turkish-American relations are destined to experience many tensions and “model partnership” will likely remain an “empty signifier.”

Endnotes

1. I borrow the term from Laclau. See Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, (London: Verso, 2007). I argue that “model partnership” as an empty signifier does not represent either the ideal or the fully accomplished state of Turkish-American relations.

2. Turkey has been helping the U.S. establish stability and security on both issues by engaging with alienated political actors, which cannot be really be done by any other actor.

3. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 36.

4. French anthropologist Claude-Levi-Strauss, deriving from French anthropologist Marcel Mauss and Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, defined empty signifier as a “pure symbol” that does not have a positive semantic value. See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, Trans. Felicity Baker (London: Routledge, 1987). An empty signifier, similar to Jakobson’s ‘zero phoneme’ or Mauss’ ‘mana,’ has a “zero symbolic value” that “can take on a value required.” In discussing German phenomenologist philosopher Edmund Husserl’s idea of “circle square,” Jacques Derrida argues that an empty signifier is a signifier that is emptied out all of its empirical content, see Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

5. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 40.