

Syria to Top Erdogan's Washington Agenda

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Turkey's worsening border situation gives President Obama considerable asking power with Erdogan on a variety of issues, including Iran, Israel, and domestic reform.

This week's summit between President Barack Obama and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan reflects the extraordinary development of relations between the United States and Turkey.

Ankara faces a civil war in Syria that is forcing Turkey to contend with a weak and divided state on its borders. This disintegration brings the dangers of chemical weapons proliferation and al Qaeda infiltration on Turkey's doorstep. Coping with these challenges will be near impossible without U.S. support, particularly after the May 11 bombings that devastated Reyhanli, a Turkish border town near Syria. Erdogan is therefore sure to make the Syria issue one of his key "asks" during his conversations with Obama on Thursday.

The fact is that Turkey has not faced a threat on the scale of the Syrian crisis since Stalin demanded territory from the Turks in 1945. In 2011, hoping to oust the al-Assad regime, Turkey began to support the Syrian opposition. But, thus far, this policy has failed, and exposed Turkey to growing risks.

For Washington's part, accommodating Turkey's requests provides the president an opportunity to cement U.S.-Turkish ties. It also bestows considerable asking power for the president on a variety of issues, from liberties in Turkey to normalization of Turkish-Israeli ties, to the Iranian nuclear impasse.

Turkey's blessing over the past decade has been its reputation as a stable country in an otherwise unstable region.

For example, Turkey has recently attracted around \$50 billion in international investment annually, funding its economic rise and helping propel it to membership in the G-20.

But the war in Syria threatens these gains. For starters, Turkey has a 500,000 strong Alawite community whose Syrian ethnic kin support the al-Assad regime against the largely Sunni Arab Syrian rebels. The Alawite vs. Sunni conflict in Syria threatens to spill over into Turkey, a danger multiplied by the growing threat from the proliferation of chemical weapons and exposure to al Qaeda. Turkey's security situation is not immune to the fallout of having a Somalia-style failed state next door.

Turkey grows because it attracts international investment; and Turkey attracts investment because it is deemed stable. The mess in Syria risks ending the country's economic miracle, something that would be bad news for the Turks and for Erdogan's political fate. The Turkish leader wants to be elected as the country's next president in the summer of 2014, and an economic downturn could upset his plans. Erdogan is aware that unless he secures more dynamic U.S. assistance against the al-Assad regime, Turkey could become the big loser in Syria -- and Erdogan the loser at the ballot box.

But Erdogan has another reason to move closer to the United States: Iran. Ankara and Tehran are locked in a proxy war in Syria, with Ankara assisting the rebels and Iran aiding the regime. And in Iraq, the two sides support opposing parties in government. The White House can build on Turkey's de facto confrontation with Tehran to help roll back Iranian adventurism, maintaining the cooperation embodied by the NATO antimissile radar. This convergence could even secure Ankara's support on the nuclear impasse.

Obama reportedly personally intervened to start Turkish-Israeli political normalization, and he can ask Erdogan to deliver further on this issue. Turkey and Israel need each other to contain the crisis in Syria, particularly on the matter of preventing chemical weapons proliferation. Full normalization of ties between the two countries, such as the re-appointment of ambassadors, would bring America's two allies together. If Erdogan does not want to squander the new rapprochement with Israel and the accompanying warming with Washington, he will have to weigh carefully if, when, and under what conditions he will travel to Gaza.

Finally, the president could also raise the issue of the state of Turkish democracy.

Turkey is currently drafting its first civilian-written constitution. The new charter ought to enshrine liberal democracy, as well as release the pressure points of Turkish society, by providing for constitutionally-mandated gender equality and freedom of expression. The charter should also mandate freedom of religion and freedom from religion, so that both secular and conservative Turks feel welcome in the new Turkey.

The takeaway of the new Turkish constitution for the White House is simple. Erdogan wants to make Turkey a Middle East leader, and he wants Washington to treat his country as such. Turkey can achieve this goal only if it becomes a true liberal democracy. Erdogan's courageous steps with his Kurdish population demonstrate his flexibility. He needs to be supported on this, as well as urged to apply the same magnanimity more broadly.

In return for asking for Turkish steps, President Obama needs to alleviate the Turkish leader's worries on Syria and Iraq. Ankara will press Washington hard on Syria, whether it be with regard to safe havens or no-fly zones, or simply stronger U.S. diplomatic effort to resolve the crisis. Even if the president is not ready to move on all of these items, any new commitment to support the rebels would be well received in Ankara.

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