

Erdogan Visits Washington

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May 7, 2013

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Brief Analysis

The May 16 summit provides an opportunity to strengthen cooperation on Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Iran.

As President Obama prepares to receive Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the White House on May 16, Ankara is casting the visit as an historic opportunity to build on the personal relationship between the two leaders. Four Middle East issues -- Iraq, Syria, Turkish-Israeli relations, and Iran -- will likely dominate the agenda. To ensure that the discussion is as productive as possible, the president will need to absorb Erdogan's views on these issues, which are not necessarily in tune with Washington's views.

IRAQ

Turkey is concerned that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is pursuing a divisive, Shiite-focused agenda in Baghdad. Ankara openly supported the secular Allawi bloc in Iraq's 2010 elections, creating bad blood between Erdogan and Maliki that has since taken on a sectarian hue. Turkey also views Maliki as Tehran's man, at a time when Iran looms as a particularly dangerous political player in the region. All of this suggests that Erdogan's rivalry with Maliki will limit U.S. policy options.

Accordingly, Obama should press Erdogan to support Baghdad as a means of stabilizing Iraq, while at the same time proposing that Turkey and the United States speak to Maliki with one voice about sectarian policies that are threatening to tear the country's democracy apart. Obama should also signal his willingness to consider new approaches to Iraq if the Maliki government continues its campaign against the Sunni Arab and Kurdish populations.

In particular, Washington and Ankara should strengthen their sometimes shaky cooperation regarding Baghdad's dispute with the Iraqi Kurds. If all parties coordinate on hydrocarbon exploration and exports, they can increase stability in Iraq while serving U.S. and Turkish interests. Specifically, they should build on last month's widely reported, high-level U.S.-Iraqi-Turkish meeting in London, scheduling further consultations and intensifying efforts to calm the dangerous situation emerging in Iraq.

SYRIA

Whereas Washington has taken a cautious approach toward the war in Syria, Ankara has been an ardent supporter of the rebel cause since late 2011. Believing that Bashar al-Assad's ouster is inevitable, Turkey has sought to undermine him by backing the political and armed opposition inside Syria. This includes allowing radical Islamist groups to cross the border, according to media reports.

To encourage closer cooperation, Washington should remind Ankara that Syria will likely evolve into a weak and divided state once Assad falls, creating instability at Turkey's doorstep for the foreseeable future. Erdogan would therefore be wise to make sure that radical groups do not gain a foothold in such a state.

For its part, Ankara still wants Washington to adopt a stronger stance on helping the Syrian opposition, but it also wants to keep Turkey's own role modest. Toward that end, it has called for a U.S. initiative to establish safe havens or no-fly zones inside Syria to protect rebel-held territories, especially in the northern border areas. Ankara also wants Washington to shift more of its anti-Assad efforts from southern Turkey to Jordan, relieving pressure stemming from frequent violence on the Turkey-Syria frontier. Even if the president is not ready to move on all of these action items, greater commitment to support the rebels would be well received in Ankara. And despite Turkey's desire to shift certain efforts to Jordan, Washington should still press Erdogan to allow U.S. civilian and military agencies to overtly support Syrians from Turkey in return for stronger U.S. and NATO commitment to his country's defense.

ISRAEL

Turkish-Israeli ties have begun to thaw following President Obama's personal intervention in March, when he brought Erdogan and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu together over the phone. Speedy normalization of bilateral relations would only add to Erdogan's asking power in Washington. For instance, if Ankara announces the appointment of a Turkish ambassador to Israel ahead of the May 16 summit, it would strengthen Erdogan's hand.

One potential obstacle is Turkey's views on Hamas, which differ from those of Israel and the United States. Ankara believes that it can convince the group to renounce violence and recognize Israel -- the conditions laid down by the Quartet (i.e., the UN secretary-general, the EU, the United States, and Russia) for negotiating with Hamas after it seized power in Gaza. Toward this end, Erdogan plans to visit Gaza following his Washington trip. In addition to complicating ties with Israel, such a visit could embarrass President Obama, who has put his personal and political capital into Turkish-Israeli rapprochement. To alleviate this problem, Washington should encourage Erdogan to make the trip inclusive if he insists on visiting Gaza, adding a stop in Israel and meeting with Palestinian Authority leaders in the West Bank as well. This approach would also serve Ankara's ambition to become a regional leader: Turkey cannot become a true Middle East power unless Erdogan has access to Israelis and Palestinians alike.

IRAN

Ankara views Iran as its chief Middle East competitor, with the two countries locked in a proxy war in Syria and an escalating political battle in Iraq. Washington should build on Turkey's strong distrust of Tehran to help roll back Iranian adventurism, maintaining cooperation on issues such as the NATO antimissile radar and perhaps even securing Ankara's support on the nuclear impasse. At the same time, the United States must be careful not to encourage any sense of sectarian Gotterdammerung between Sunnis and Shiites -- a divide that lies just below the

surface in much of Middle Eastern affairs at present.

TURKEY AS A SOFT-POWER ALLY

More broadly, the United States would do well to leverage Turkey's unique strengths in the region, stemming from its military capabilities, relatively stable democratic system, economic success, middle-class values, and cultural and social influence. Yet Ankara's interests are not always the same as Washington's, and Turkey wants to be a full partner with the United States rather than a surrogate. Therefore, any joint efforts should be based on careful, case-by-case assessment.

One of the most important areas of cooperation is primarily an internal Turkish political issue -- Erdogan's courageous opening to the country's Kurdish population, linked to the recent ceasefire with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). As Ankara's unwavering ally in combat against the PKK, Washington should highlight the positive impact that this development will have on stability and democracy in Turkey and, potentially, the region. Many Turkish political elites continue to oppose such rapprochement, so Erdogan could use all the support he can get in continuing this process.

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