

For Obama, the Key to Damascus May Lie in Ankara

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Articles & Testimony

Washington must rein in Turkey before a conflagration further complicates U.S. options for addressing the Syrian civil war.

This piece is part of "*Obama and the Middle East: Act Two* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-atlantic-obama-and-the-middle-east-act-two>), " a series of policy proposals for the president's second term by Washington Institute fellows.

Syria promises to be a major headache for the Obama administration during its second term. But if Washington works with Ankara effectively, Turkey can help the U.S. achieve an endgame in Damascus. To facilitate this coordination, Washington should assign a full-time, high-level White House envoy to work with Ankara on Syria.

Escalating clashes along the Syrian-Turkish border have raised fears that Turkey, a NATO ally, might prematurely get pulled into the Syria conflict. Policymakers and the Turkish public held their breath following the downing of a Turkish fighter jet in June 2012, and escalating artillery duels have raised fears of imminent Turkish intervention.

To avoid this risky scenario, Washington must be able to anticipate Ankara's next steps, and find ways to pull Ankara back when necessary. This is where a White House envoy could play a crucial role. The Turks, reveling in their post-imperial glory, would greatly appreciate a specially-designated White House representative who would talk to them, and they would listen to this envoy, too.

Although Turkey and the United States both want Assad to go, the two countries are in different places. For Washington, Syria is a smoldering conflict, and Americans abhor the Assad regime. But Washington fears the unknown after Assad, and is reluctant to get dragged into a war in another Muslim country. So, the United States has been taking baby steps in Syria and avoiding military engagement. The American strategy is designed in anticipation of a soft-landing in Syria. The hope is that the opposition will coalesce and take over the country gradually, deposing Assad and avoiding the anarchy that would ensue if the Assad regime were to evaporate overnight.

For Ankara, the Syrian conflict is a conflagration next door that needs to be extinguished now. Assad has to go, and

fast. Many reasons drive the Turkish calculus. First, there is the uptick in Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) attacks. As soon as Ankara took sides against the Assad regime in August 2011, Damascus retaliated, allowing the Turks' archenemy, the PKK, and its Syrian franchise, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), to operate on its territory again.

Iran, too, has acted to punish Turkey for its stance against Damascus. Only days after Ankara called for the ouster of the Assad regime in September 2011, Iran entered a truce with the PKK and its Iranian franchise, Party for Democratic Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), which it had been hitherto fighting. With this ceasefire, Tehran effectively secured the PKK's rear flank and freed its hand to target Turkey. Accordingly, the PKK has become a bigger menace to Turkey than it has been since the early 1990s.

All this bodes poorly for Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who wants to be elected as the country's next president in 2014, filling the seat of Turkey's founder and first president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Erdogan has almost all the stars aligned to achieve this goal. He has defanged Turkey's once staunchly secularist military, and tamed the once inveterately anti-Erdogan business community and media. The PKK is what stands between Erdogan and the Turkish presidency. If the Syrian crisis continues unabated, related PKK violence will take more Turkish lives, challenging Erdogan's authority further. In such an eventuality, political imperatives alone will drive Erdogan to an interventionist policy against the Assad regime.

In other words, Erdogan may not have the patience to wait for the soft landing that Washington desires. This is where White House envoy to coordinate Syria policy with Ankara comes in.

This envoy's task would be two fold. The first task is listening. Take for instance, recent reports that Ankara might be training anti-Assad elements, while turning a blind eye to Salafist penetration into Syria. Although unverified, such reports make sense. Erdogan is determined to use any means available to hasten the ouster of the Assad regime. A White House envoy who visits Ankara and the Turkish border with Syria would be able to decipher these trends early on.

The envoy's second job would be to wield the White House's clout in real-time. Erdogan, who has an amicable relationship with President Obama, would feel compelled to listen to Obama's emissary. This would allow the White House envoy to anticipate, support, and when necessary forestall risky Turkish military steps against the Assad regime.

Erdogan is savvy enough not to launch a full-scale military invasion of Syria. Such an adventure would surpass Turkey's economic and military capacity. But who can guarantee that he will not go for a limited engagement, taking over a sliver of territory across the border in a desperate bid to secure badly needed security and domestic prestige?

If not coordinated with the United States, such Turkish steps will complicate U.S. Syria policy. For starters, an impetuous move on Turkey's part would force Washington and Ankara to hash out their "day after" policies before having a chance to work out differences of views on the role of opposition elements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria.

A permanent envoy would ensure that Ankara and Washington are on the same page when it comes to dealing with Assad. As an indirect benefit, a solid relationship with Turkey in Syria could also pave the way for better U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Iraq and Iran. In short, appointing a Syria envoy to Turkey is a small investment that will pay dividends for both countries.

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