

Why Secretary Clinton Is Going to Istanbul

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Aug 10, 2012

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Clinton's trip may be a way of conveying U.S. determination to prevent the Syria crisis from sucking the region into disaster.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Turkey on Saturday is loaded with symbolism -- and she will have a packed agenda.

But first, there's the setting to consider. Even though Clinton is visiting Turkey for official business, she is scheduled to bypass Ankara, the country's capital, and will instead hold meetings in Istanbul, the former capital of the Ottoman Empire and the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) preferred choice for international meetings.

Anyone with any doubts over whether Turkey had been transformed under the AKP in the past decade should now be able to lay them to rest: Turkey has all but abandoned its secularist nation-state ethos, for which Ankara has served as a symbol, and embraced its pre-Kemalist Ottoman heritage, centered in Istanbul.

Istanbul's significance doesn't stop there: the city hosts the Syrian National Council (SNC), one of the groups claiming to represent the Syrian opposition. When she meets members of this opposition in Istanbul, Secretary Clinton will no doubt make sure to pose in public with a broad array of Syrians, not just those of the SNC. So expect photo-ops with a diverse array of Syrians, including those in the non-violent opposition, women, Kurds, Christians, young internet activists, and, if things really work out, even Alawites, the group from which the Bashar al-Assad regime draws overwhelming support.

Clinton is also expected to tell the Turks that Washington is with them against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Kurdish group that has launched a number of ferocious attacks into Turkey from northern Iraq, where it is based, claiming more than a dozen casualties already this month.

The Turks are increasingly angry with the PKK and blame Syria -- and, indirectly, its patron Iran -- for the group's attacks. Damascus and Tehran do indeed have a strong incentive to encourage the PKK to target Ankara -- the PKK has always been Turkey's weak point and, as Iran and Syria are well aware, playing the PKK card is the best way to

make Turkey think twice about its policy of confronting the al-Assad regime.

Turkey has implied it would respond to Syrian support for the PKK with military action if necessary. Indeed, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has even reportedly stated: "Who knows that we will not do it? Our three military units are performing exercises on the [Turkish-Syrian] border."

Without a doubt, these issues will be central to Clinton's visit. So, presumably, will be discussions about whether to arm the Free Syrian Army. But Washington, for its part, also appears to have growing concerns over Turkey's reaction to PKK violence, worrying it could potentially trigger a military conflict between Turkey, a NATO ally, and Damascus, thus pulling the United States into a military operation to help Ankara. This would be an unwelcome development for the White House, which would surely want to avoid becoming embroiled in another conflict so close to the presidential elections in November.

Ultimately, though, this visit is about symbolism, and discussing contingency planning with America's only NATO ally bordering Syria is a highly visible way to convey U.S. determination to avoid events in Syria sucking the region into disaster. That may be the most meaningful take-away from Clinton's trip to Istanbul.

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